

NECESSARY EVIL: RHETORICAL VIOLENCE IN 20TH  
CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Dissertation

by

JAMES ANDREW BAKER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2006

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

Necessary Evil: Rhetorical Violence in 20<sup>th</sup> Century

American Literature. (May 2006)

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Wayne Booth and other rhetorical critics have developed methods for examining the rhetorical aspects of fiction. In this dissertation, I examine, specifically, the use of rhetorical violence in American fiction. It is my premise that authors use rhetorical violence and the irrationality of violence created mimetically to construct ironic metaphors that comment on the irrationality of the ideology behind the violence, pushing that ideology's maxims to its logical ends. The goal of rhetorical violence, therefore, is to create the conditions for a transfer of culpability so that the act becomes transitive-transferable-loosed from its moorings. Culpability, if indeed it reflects something intrinsically awry with an ideology, becomes the fault of the ideology—it becomes the perpetrator of illogic and the condemnatory force associated with the act of violence gets transferred to it. Hence, if the author has created an effective metaphor, when he or she flips the violent scene's "value," the audience is willing to follow along. The violence remains a great evil, but the culpability for the act is shifted to a representative of the

ideology in question-as-victimizer; nonetheless, that transfer can only occur inasmuch as the audience is willing to force-fit the incongruities of the metaphor.

I examine this rhetorical phenomenon in the works of three modern American writers: Flannery O'Connor, Toni Morrison, and Chuck Palahniuk. I seek to examine the ideologies questioned in these works, the contradictory beliefs expressed by the authors, and to explicate primary episodes in the works of fiction wherein rhetorical violence functions in a rhetorical fashion to promulgate the author's ideology by emotionally jarring the reader loose from commonly-held ideological assumptions in three specific appeals: first, to negate one socially-held ideology in order to promote a conflicting one (*Wise Blood*); second, to elicit compassion for victimized characters representing social ills (*Beloved*); third, to call into question the validity of social institutions and practices (*Fight Club*).

## DEDICATION

*For Deedra, who believes the world is good.*

*For Eva and Jackson in the hope that she is right.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Roman poet Ovid once said, “Only our songs escape the flames.” In light of that, perhaps the acknowledgments page is the most significant part of a dissertation in that it provides the opportunity for the writer to express appreciation to those who have served not only as educators and encouragers, but ultimately, his or her exclusive audience in many ways. Therefore, to the people who have served as my teachers, mentors and friends, I would like to say thank you. The members of the English Department faculty at Texas A&M University have provided me with an environment that has been both affirming and challenging. Among them, I would especially like to express my utmost gratitude to Dr. M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Dr. Chris Holcomb, Dr. Jan Swearingen and Dr. John J. McDermott for their insights and guidance. Finally, to my family and friends, thank you for your encouragement and support without which I would have never completed this project.

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: “A VIOLENCE FROM WITHIN”

*The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.*

—Wallace Stevens. *The Necessary Angel*, 36.

In the words of Flannery O'Connor, “Fiction begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses—and every fiction writer is bound by this fundamental aspect of his medium” (*Collected* 816). Wayne Booth and other rhetorical critics have developed methods for examining the rhetorical aspects of fiction. In some cases, works of fiction are persuasive because they deliberately and effectively manipulate readers’ responses—something Booth calls the “crafty calculations of commercial entertainers” (*Rhetoric* xiv). Yet, as Booth cautions, “The success of an author’s rhetoric does not depend on whether he thought about his readers as he wrote... ‘mere calculation’ cannot insure success”; therefore, whether the rhetoric is deliberately placed into the work or not, it is often present in fiction because “the author’s judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it” (*Rhetoric* 20). This aspect of authorial presence may be attributed to the author’s inherent beliefs:

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This dissertation follows the style of the Modern Language Association (MLA).

All narratives both depend on and impose what I [call] “beliefs” and “norms,” what modern jargon calls “values,” what Bakhtin and other continental critics call “ideology.” All stories, even the most seemingly neutral, depend, both in what they say and in their silences, on appeals to moral, political, and religious judgments—using the word “religious” in the broad sense found in anthropologists’ discussions these days. Many an effort at a more scientific treatment of narrative... has foundered, for me, on this hard truth: in fictional forms most of the important facts are simultaneously values, and to ignore the values is to turn the object studied into something less than itself. (*Rhetoric* 419)

It is my premise that authors who use rhetorical violence in works of fiction in the way described above do so with rhetorical intent—to bring about a shift in thinking in the minds of readers, and in keeping with Booth’s assessment, this typically involves the revaluation of an existing ideology, or something Hodge and Kress identify as the dynamic social function of discourse and text as the primary means of “reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values which make up a culture” (6).

In the strategy analyzed in this dissertation, I follow Booth’s assumption that “rhetoric is compatible with art” (*Rhetoric* xiv). Specifically, I seek to examine the way American authors use rhetorical violence and the irrationality of violence created mimetically to construct ironic metaphors that comment on the irrationality of the ideology behind the violence, pushing that ideology’s maxims to its logical ends. Aristotle first described the rhetorical potential of such constructions, noting that the most efficacious of styles makes use of metaphors that function to “bring” a situation “before-

the-eyes [*pro ommaton poiein*]” of an audience by making it “actualized [*energeia*],” or *enlivened* (*Rhetoric* 3.10.6). Thus, such rhetorical tropes are characterized by energy—what Burke identifies as the quality of language as “an aspect of action, that is, as symbolic action”—because they move the argument out of the normal field of play by forcing a shift in grounds; assuming the ideology in question is commonly-held by most people, the violence functions to shock them into relinquishing the normative assumptions that would otherwise govern their own moral or political assumptions (“From” 1034). It is a radical means of shifting the grounds of the argument—or as Burke claims, “a poet’s identification with imagery of murder or suicide, either one or the other, is, from the ‘neutral’ point of view, merely a concern with *terms for transformation in general*” (*Rhetoric* 11, Burke’s italics). It transforms the basic assumptions of the argument by forcing it into a new and unfamiliar frame by which it is to be judged.<sup>1</sup> It challenges the rules.

I will approach violent fiction looking for two specific rhetorical qualities and practices: its use of metaphors consisting of incongruent combinations of images (such as Morrison’s rendering of infanticide as an act of compassion), and its frequent purpose: to challenge cultural ideologies. From a psychological perspective, fiction works on

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<sup>1</sup> This draws upon another of Burke’s concepts: “terministic screens,” which are essentially ways of encoding the production and interpretation of discourse through certain contexts, or in Burke’s terms, “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others. . . . Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than another. Also, *many of the ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made*. In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms (“From” 1035, Burke’s italics).

readers' senses to create responses. Among the most effective methods for stimulating readers' responses are metaphors and other images, and violent metaphors and images, necessarily, are particularly latent with persuasive potential. Often the goal of authors who use rhetorical violence is to create the conditions for a transfer of culpability so that the violent act becomes transitive—transferable—loosed from its moorings; it takes advantage of what René Girard regards as “the ability of violence to move from one object to another” (19).<sup>2</sup> Culpability, if indeed it reflects something intrinsically awry with an ideology, becomes the fault of the ideology—it becomes the perpetrator of illogic, and the condemnatory force associated with the act of violence gets transferred to it. Hence, if the author has created an effective metaphor, when he or she flips the violent scene's rhetorical “value,” the audience is willing to follow along. The reprehensible act is cut from its ethical moorings and becomes a free radical, yet it retains all of its original intensity—only now, the author is at liberty to redefine it and load it with a new meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> Girard, in *Violence and the Sacred*, proposes that the use of human sacrifice by primitive cultures evolved into the judicial systems of today. The entire quotation is as follows: “In primitive societies the risk of unleashed violence is so great and the cure so problematic that the emphasis naturally falls on prevention. The preventative measures naturally fall within the domain of religion, where they can on occasion assume a violent character. Violence and the sacred are inseparable. But the covert appropriation by sacrifice of certain properties of violence—particularly the ability of violence to move from one object to another—is hidden from sight by the awesome machinery of ritual” (19). In this context, religious ritual performs a rhetorical function, as implied in his statement about the “awesome machinery of ritual”: the “sacred” is the rhetoric of religion that encodes the “ritual” by changing its meaning, and in thereby doing, facilitates the shifting of culpability from the perpetrator to the victim of sacrifice by *interpreting* the violence for the audience with the end result being to defuse the tendency toward retribution in the form of blood feuds. This is relative to Burke's dramatic theory wherein “language [is] an aspect of ‘action,’ that is, as ‘symbolic action’” (“From” 1034). I propose that rhetorical violence, as “symbolic action,” is encoded similarly to the actual violence and the ritualization process described by Girard—while “real” violence and “mimetic” violence are obviously different matters, mimetic violence draws upon the characteristics of the “real” in the author's attempt to create “symbolic” action.

The violence remains a great evil, but the culpability for the act can be shifted to a representative of the ideology in question-as-victimizer; nonetheless, that transfer can only occur inasmuch as the audience is willing to force-fit the incongruities of the metaphor, or as Booth contends, “as a rhetorician, an author finds that some of the beliefs on which a full appreciation of his work depends come ready-made, fully accepted by the postulated reader as he comes to the book, and some must be implanted or reinforced” (*Rhetoric* 177).

In this dissertation, I will approach the topic of rhetorical violence in fiction by analyzing works from three modern writers: Flannery O’Connor, Toni Morrison, and Chuck Palahniuk. I seek to examine the ideologies questioned in these works, the contradictory beliefs expressed by the authors, and to explicate primary episodes in the works of fiction wherein, I believe, violence functions in a rhetorical fashion to promulgate the author’s ideology by emotionally jarring the reader loose from commonly-held ideological assumptions in three specific appeals: first, to negate one socially-held ideology in order to promote a conflicting one (*Wise Blood*); second, to elicit compassion for victimized characters representing social ills (*Beloved*); third, to call into question the validity of social institutions and practices (*Fight Club*). In all three cases, *energeiac* forms of rhetoric were applied, but to different effect, with the first being to champion one route to “enlightenment” over another in a grotesque novel, the second, to educe compassion in an anti-realistic novel, and the third as a metaphor for the existentialist Will to Power in a highly satirical novel.

## The Physical Nature of Metaphor

Nietzsche ponders in the *Genealogy of Morals*, how does one “create a memory for the human animal” and “impress anything on that partly dull, partly flighty human intelligence—that incarnation of forgetfulness—so as to make it stick?” He determines that “a thing is branded on the memory to make it stay there; only what goes on hurting will stick,” noting that pain is the “strongest aid to mnemonics” going on to add that “there is perhaps nothing more terrible in man’s earliest history than his mnemotechnics” (192, 93). The legend of Simonides (whom Quintilian credits as the “first person to discover an art of memory”) is based in mortal tragedy. The poet, Simonides, leaves a banquet he is attending given by one of his benefactors only moments before

the banquet hall fell in upon the heads of the guests and wrought such havoc among them that the relatives of the dead who came to seek the bodies for burial were unable to distinguish not merely the faces but even the limbs of the dead. Then it is said, Simonides, who remembered the order in which the guests had been sitting, succeeded in restoring to each man his own dead. (Quintilian 11.2.11-13)

As Jody Enders observes, “If ever there were an early articulation of Jacques Derrida’s belief that ‘life is already threatened by the origin of the memory which constitutes it,’ it is the Simonides legend, which stages the violence of epistemology as *memoria*” (64). It is also intimately tied to ritual, burial, closure for the human concerns of the soul-house, implicit, as Enders notes, “in Simonides’s discovery is the status of memory as a sepulcher and its concomitant links with death” (72). The legend’s main point is not the

violent death scene necessarily, so much as it is that memory is aided by orderly arrangement; however, as Enders concludes, inherent to mnemotechnics is the principle that the object of remembrance must first die in order to be brought back to life; that the metaphorically encrypted and subsequently resurrected dead are moving, talking, images or simulacra; that mnemotechnics renders present those who are absent or dead; and that it does so by repainting their picture and by giving them voice. (72)

Memory, then, may be described as an exercise in “*metaphorically* encrypt[ing]” the past by “reanimating” that which no longer is; hence, it is naturally concerned with things, places, people and ideas that are “dead” in the sense that they existed in the past. But the interesting point here concerning mnemotechnics is this: Nietzsche and the Simonides legend concern themselves with the energy innate to pain as a means of evoking memory that results in *metaphor*; hence, it must be noted that metaphor is linked to the body—that memory functions by virtue of metaphor, and as such, metaphor and memory are bound together. Memory is a critical aspect of learning, and as such, the relationship between pain and memory, memory and metaphor, and metaphor and rhetoric should be apparent, since, as Cicero asserted, the three aspects of the *officia oratoris* (“duties of the orator”) are: to teach (*docere*), delight (*delectare*) and move (*movere*).

Metaphors of the body take advantage of the same emotional, non-cognitive level of perception invoked by the fear response that drives mnemotechnics. Since the most complex rhetorical systems are unique to the human experience, and all such “experience” is necessarily encoded rhetorically in response to physical stimuli, it follows

that violence is particularly suited to the production of metaphor because of its intrinsic attachment to the body and the basic human instincts of self-preservation and pain avoidance. Burke, in *Language as Symbolic Action*, asserts that all human activities are modes of symbolizing; that metaphor is the act of being human. Similarly, Kennedy isolates metaphor as a uniquely human trope (*Comparative* 16). Lakoff and Johnson devote an entire chapter of *Metaphors We Live By* to ontological metaphors which, they argue, are “ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” and are the result of the human impulse to superimpose boundaries on everything outside of themselves as a way of reconciling it to the strictures of the body, which also suggests the self-preservation instinct as a way to establish control and safety in one’s environment (25). The Gospel of John begins by describing Christ as the “word made flesh,” the living metaphor of God-ness. Conversely, psychoanalytic critic Robert Rogers, in *Metaphor: A Psychoanalytic View*, states that metaphor is “the flesh made word” (86). In short, all of these theorists assert and confirm the connection between *metaphor* and the *body*.

To make explicit this connection between metaphor and physicality, consider the visceral impact of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Cut”:

What a thrill—  
 My thumb instead of an onion.  
 The top quite gone  
 Except for a sort of a hinge  
 Of skin,



A flap like a hat,

Dead white.

Clearly, any reader, regardless of gender or social identity, can empathize with the disturbing lines above, and, in all probability, responds reflexively to those words with something similar to the basic characteristics of pain response—sucking in the breath the teeth, or a tightening of the sphincter, rubbing the fingertips. Rogers describes this physiological phenomenon as follows:

The presence of clusters of body imagery tends to cue the reader in such a way as to mobilize his primary-process activity. That activity then becomes part of the developing modal ambiguity that provides the dynamics for deep, complex responses to poetry's full range of meaning. . . . Poets instinctively turn to images of the body when they mean to disturb the reader most. (85, 90)

Works like Plath's function on the connectedness of the *soma* and *psyche*; the audience, who may or may not have ever cut themselves while slicing vegetables, nonetheless becomes involved in the narrator's experience by identification with their own experiences or fears created by the imagery. Implicit to Rogers' observation that "images of the body" are selected by poets "when they mean to disturb the reader most" (90) is reserved for those messages that the author deems to be the most necessary to communicate because they carry the most mimetic and rhetorical efficacy.

One of the most explicit indicators of physical existence is our common ability to feel and seek to avoid pain as it relates to the self-preservation instinct. Perhaps, as

Kennedy postulates, rhetoric is a natural evolutionary development within both humans and animals driven by these instinctual motivations:

Analogies between features of nonhuman animal behavior and traditional concepts of rhetoric among human beings suggest that rhetoric has its basis in natural instincts and supports the hypothesis that it is a form of energy. Rhetoric is biologically prior to speech and to conscious intentionality. The most fundamental of the instincts that created rhetoric is the instinct for self-preservation and for preservation of the genetic line. Among social animals this has been broadened to include the preservation and well-being of the family, the social group, and other members of the species. In this sense it is conservative and defensive. It is often an instrument of change, but this results from the efforts of others: It develops from a defensive instinct. When rhetorical techniques are used offensively by animals the functions are to secure territory, to acquire access to food, or to gain a mate. These functions lie behind much of human rhetoric in the form of the acquisitions of power and possessions. (*Comparative* 26)

While “human language and rhetoric are far more complex than anything found in the animal kingdom” (27), rhetoric may be regarded as a highly-evolved defense mechanism—a more efficient system than overt violence—because, as Kennedy postulates, “it is less expensive of energy than is the use of force.” Hence, rhetoric may be considered “a form of mental energy” invoked by “an emotional reaction to a situation in which an individual feels threatened or perceives the opportunity to gain some advantage” (26). Kennedy’s emphasis here is on the “conservation” of energy; however,

this needs to be qualified inasmuch as it is relative: while rhetorical energy may be conservative in the sense of physical expenditure of energy in the completion of a task is concerned, I would argue that this does not diminish the quality, intensity or impact of the latent energy inherent to rhetorical energy. This energy may be conservative of physical strength, but it reflects an evolved power—one that is more efficient, but by virtue of this efficiency also invokes a potentially higher degree of latency. The domination of human creatures by virtue of our linguistic capability alone should attest to the dominance of rhetorical energy over and above brute strength.

But what, then, do we make of war, or the most overt example of physical force? Burke's postulation in the opening chapter of *A Rhetoric of Motives* is indicative of this latent energy in rhetoric relative to the greatest manifestations of physical domination. In this argument, he draws a parallel between the themes of suicide and warlike death in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and the two Matthew Arnold poems, "Empedocles on Etna" and "Sohrab and Rustum" in order to illustrate his concept of "transcendence," one of the principal notions from his dramatisic theory. From this context, he illustrates the thought processes behind "imaging" motives:

The battlefield, for instance, which permits rival contestants to join in battle, itself "transcends" their factionalism, being "superior" to it and "neutral" to their motives, though the conditions of the terrain may happen to favor one faction. The *principles* of war are not themselves warlike, and are ultimately reducible to universal principles of physics and dialectic. Similarly, a poet's identification with imagery of murder or suicide, either one or the other, is, from the "neutral" point

of view, merely a concern with *terms for transformation in general*. (*Rhetoric* 11, Burke's italics)

Burke, here, elevates war to the plain of discourse—he makes it equivalent to the “universal principles of physics and dialectic” and later describes it as the “ultimate *disease* of cooperation” because it “requires a myriad of constructive acts for each destructive one” and “identification is compensatory to division” (22). The essence of war—for conflict and violence in general, for Burke's purposes—is “transformation in general,” which is illustrative of a vast catalog of possible terms for rhetorical motives. However, when applied to the prevalence of violence in American letters, Burke's formula suggests that one common transcendent motive behind it is the result of the uniquely dynamic nature of American society—if violence is a common metaphor for transformation, is it not to be expected that the literature of a society that embraces progress and change would be characterized by the free use of violent tropes to elicit and solicit transformation? And if transformation is the motive, then the use of violence rhetorically must inevitably be regarded as a mode of persuasion.

Burke later asserts, “Since imagery built about the active, reflexive, and passive forms of death (killing, self-killing, and being killed) so obviously contributes to dramatic intensity, and since thoughts of death are so basic to human motivation, we usually look no farther to account for their use” (*Rhetoric* 13). Burke's second comment relegates rhetorical violence to the obvious—it makes things more interesting, and as such, requires no further speculation with regard to its efficacy. However, it is noteworthy that Burke chose such violent examples to illustrate the concept of rhetorical “imaging,”

along with the “dramatic intensity” he refers to as the motivation behind its artistic uses. Certainly, psychological phenomenon is at play in the efficiency of violent rhetoric and images in the realm of communication, but what can be taken at face value is the fact that it *is* a powerful and useful means by which to arrest the human intellect that crashes through the insularity of language and reality as a construct to connect with a given audience on a purely emotional basis. And because it has this power to slash through the levels of remove inherent to the semiotic system, it must also be considered a cogent idea delivery system.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Burke observes that “the so-called ‘desire to kill’ a certain person is much more properly analyzable as a desire to *transform the principle* which that person *represents* (*Rhetoric* 13, Burke’s italics). In the *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke moves fluidly between examples from literature and culture, or to put it another way, between *symbolic* and *actual* violence. In this particular instance, he is referring to “the Nazis, locating the transformandum in the whole Jewish people” and “the frequent psychoanalytic search for ‘unconscious’ desires to kill some member of the family”—not simply rhetorical or mimetic types of violence (13). What this suggests is that there is an underlying rhetorical motive behind these acts of violence, whether symbolic or actual, and that this violence is often created by a conflict of “principles” that a given entity *represents*.

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<sup>3</sup> It is also highly rhetorical in that Burke’s comments parallel Cicero’s three aspects of the *officia oratoris* (“duties of the orator”): to teach (*docere*), delight (*delectare*) and move (*movere*).

## Aristotelian Roots of the Theory of Rhetorical Violence

Burke's observations about the persuasive value of rhetorical violence is ultimately rooted in the thought of Aristotle. Aristotle was aware of the mnemonic value of rhetorical violence, and when he discusses metaphor and vividness in the *Art of Rhetoric*, he, prior to Burke, chooses violent literary examples to illustrate his point. The term Aristotle uses most often to describe this phenomenon is *ἐνεργεία* (*energeia*), which is ordinarily translated as "an action, operation, energy" (Liddell, Scott & Jones) and shares the same root with other terms meaning "to make or create." *Energeia* is relative to a homonymous (and nearly synonymous) rhetorical term, *enargeia*, which is ordinarily translated as "clearness, distinctness, vividness" and often refers specifically to vividly descriptive narration in the context of the forensic rhetoric. However, most significantly, Aristotle's concept is about metaphors that project *aliveness*—or as Paul Ricoeur suggests, Aristotle means metaphors that

present men "*as acting*" and all things "*as in act*"—such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action as actualized. *Lively* expression is that which expresses existence as *alive*.  
(43, Ricoeur's italics)

Therefore, it can be assumed that when Aristotle uses the term *energeia* in the opening passage of Book 3, Chapter 11 of the *Rhetoric* to describe the most effective type of metaphor for use in rhetoric, it is colored by his use of the same term in the *Metaphysics* where he uses it to describe the ontological aspect of "actuality," or the essence of

“being” itself.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the most effective types of metaphors for persuasion are those that most closely evoke the *energy* of life, or “being” (and death, necessarily) to the audience.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle’s discussion of metaphor is largely concerned with the mechanics of persuasion, and deals mostly with matters of *lexis*, or stylistics. The concept of *energeia* first appears in Chapter 11 within the context of Aristotle’s discussion of stylistic devices that hinder persuasion, principal among them the use of “unfamiliar” language. What he suggests instead amounts to a sort of discourse featuring “*energeia*-loaded” metaphors characterized by the use of physiological, or “enlivened” images that connect with the audience in a visceral way. The greatest tool for the orator in creating the learning opportunity, he contends, is most often the metaphor, which by definition involves reframing something by renaming it something dissimilar, but with a logical connective, and in doing so, to bestow a new insight into the thing itself. In other words, Aristotle posits that metaphor creates a teachable (in the sense of “learning” as a means of influence or persuasion) moment by forcing the listener to reason out a paradox in order

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<sup>4</sup> While the *Metaphysics* is concerned with *psusis* (nature) and not *nomos* (convention) which excludes language, *per se*, Ricoeur argues in regard to Aristotle’s use of the term in both instances, “We believe we understand *phusis* when we translate it by *nature*. But is not the word *nature* as far off the mark with respect to *phusis* as is the word *imitation* concerning *mimêsis*? Certainly Greek man was far less quick than we are to identify *phusis* with some inert “given.” Perhaps it is because, for him, nature is itself living that *mimêsis* can be not enslaving and that compositional and creative imitation of nature can be possible. Is this not what the most enigmatic passage of the *Rhetoric* suggests? Metaphor, it relates, makes one *see things* because it “represents things as in a state of activity” (1411 b 24-5). The *Poetics* echoes that one may “speak in narrative” or present “personages as acting [*hôs prattontas*] and doing [*energountas*]” (1448 a 22, 28). Might there not be an underlying relationship between “signifying active reality” and speaking out *phusis*? . . . To present men “*as acting*” and all things “*as in act*”—such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action as actualized. *Lively* expression is that which expresses existence as *alive*” (43, Ricoeur’s italics).

to re-establish cognitive equilibrium, and in so doing, arrive at new insight. As a point of clarification, Aristotle differentiates between poetic metaphors and those appropriate to rhetoric, advocating only “a word in its prevailing and native meaning and metaphor” as being “useful in the *lexis* of prose” (3.2 6). In the same passage, he explains further:

A sign of this is that these are the only kinds of words everybody uses; for all people carry on their conversations with metaphors and words in their native and prevailing meanings. Thus it is clear that if one composes well, there will be an unfamiliar quality and it escapes notice and will be clear. This, [clarity] we said, was the virtue of rhetorical language.

But how can something be at one and the same time “unfamiliar” while escaping “notice” and “clear”? The enigmatic statement is more pointed than it seems; like the word metaphor itself,<sup>5</sup> Aristotle is demonstrating by example that what he means is the *appearance* of clarity is what is at issue—the creation of familiarity. Hence, the key concept here, rather than “clear,” is “escapes notice.” Something that is familiar yet unfamiliar would necessarily be attractively puzzling because such a construction would create disequilibrium in the minds of the audience members by converting the passive process of listening to an active one requiring contemplation. On the other hand, “an unfamiliar quality” that “escapes notice and will be clear” has an undeniably sinister feel to it as well in keeping with Aristotle’s belief that “every potentiality is at the same time a

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<sup>5</sup> According to Kennedy, “*Metaphor* is itself a metaphor and literally means ‘carrying something from one place to another, transference.’ In *Poetics* 21.7 it is defined as ‘a movement [*epiphora*] of an alien [*allotrios*] name either from genus to species or from species to genus or from species to species or by analogy’” (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 222).



potentiality for the opposite,” and it is undeniable that such potential is inherent to rhetoric. The efficacy of a given rhetorical device is not dependent upon the virtue of the claim it is used to support.

In chapter ten, Aristotle sets out to determine the sources of *asteia*, [expressions “of the town”—urbanities] and *eudokimounta* [well-liked expressions] (3.10.1). He makes the claim,

To learn easily is naturally pleasant to people, and words signify something, so whatever words create knowledge in us are the pleasantest. Glosses are unintelligible, but we know words in their prevailing meaning [*kyria*]. Metaphor most brings about learning; for when [Homer in *Odyssey* 4.213] calls old age “stubble,” he creates understanding and knowledge through the genus, since both old age and stubble are [species of the genus of] things that have lost their bloom. . . . Those things are necessarily urbane, both in lexis and in enthymemes, which create quick learning in our minds. (3.10.2-4)

Here Aristotle further clarifies the specific type of metaphor he is referring to. Achieving the “urbanity” he is advocating requires “quick learning.” Yet, there is an important distinction to be made between Aristotle’s opening sentence of the *Metaphysics* (“All human beings by nature desire to know”) and the didactic potential of metaphor in rhetoric, wherein the emphasis is on the *pleasure* of learning *easily*. This is no doubt what Aristotle was referring to when he described a style that has “an unfamiliar quality and it escapes notice and will be clear.” To *teach* is not the only goal of rhetoric; the efficacy of the metaphor lies in its ability to evoke a visceral response in the listener. The mechanism

of metaphor requires the listener to think through a small problem (or “unfamiliar quality”), and when accomplished successfully, triggers the psychological reward, or pleasure, of learning. Essential to the formula is the use of metaphors that are somewhere between trite enthymemes, or ones that are so familiar they don’t require any thought, and complex poetic metaphors that require concentration to comprehend. These metaphors function like psychological speed bumps, and the goal is to jar the audience’s thought processes just enough to pique interest but not enough to distract them from following the argument—to make it “unfamiliar” in an “unnoticeable” way. While Aristotle’s thesis here is “urbanity” characterized by “clarity,” there is an inherently deceptive potential in the ability of such metaphors to hide persuasion, particularly since they are capable of doing so *regardless* of the message imbedded within the conundrum itself. Hence, this type of metaphor may function as a kind of rhetorical “Trojan Horse” that camouflages persuasion as *easy* learning, so much so that it “escapes notice,” but is nonetheless “clear.” It is a subtle type of *pathos* wherein the persuasion is totally unencumbered by any requirement for evidentiary validity. It works simply because it *feels* like a realization the listener arrived at on his own. Aristotle concludes this section with the summation:

Furthermore, [urbanity is achieved] by means of bringing-before-the-eyes [*prommaton poiein*, or visualization]; for things should be seen as being done rather than as in the future. To achieve [urbanity in style] one should thus aim at three things: metaphor, antithesis, actualization [*energeia*]. (3.10.6)

The remainder of chapter 10 is devoted to explaining the concept of *pro ommaton* through the vehicle of metaphor by analogy.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle provides over twenty examples of metaphors that are “bringing-before-the-eyes,”<sup>7</sup> a number of which are violent in nature.

Chapter eleven continues the discussion of *pro ommaton* with specific regard to *energeia*. Aristotle explains, “I call those things ‘before the eyes’ that signify things engaged in an activity [*energounta*]” (3.11.2). Linked with the extensive illustrations at the end of chapter ten, what becomes obvious is a formula that Aristotle is proposing: a fusing of metaphor-visualization-actualization to create a sophisticated style. All three elements must be present for urbanity to be achieved. To reiterate:

For example, to say that a man is “foursquare” is a metaphor, for both are complete, but it does not signify activity [*energeia*]. But the phrase “having his prime of life in full bloom” is *energeia*, as is “you, like an *apheton*” and “now then the Greeks darting forward on their feet.” *Darting* is actualization and metaphor; for he means “quickly.” (3.11.2)

Here Aristotle concludes his formula for urbanity of style, further clarifying the technique for creating *energeia*-infused metaphor, indicating that it should be “enlivened”—animated, rooted in the body and living physiology—so that it forces a mental image on the audience. Persuasion occurs, according to Aristotle, when behavior and belief are

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<sup>6</sup> In *Poetics* 21.7, Aristotle lists four types of metaphor: genus to species, species to genus, species to species, or from analogy (proportional).

<sup>7</sup> What is meant is the use of the present tense to describe future action; but the use of the “historic” present to describe past action is commoner. Through the rest of the chapter Aristotle uses *bringing-before-the-eyes* as a technical term (Kennedy’s note Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 245).

modified, “changed,” because an individual “sees” something in a new way and receives pleasure from learning, and feels as if progress is being made toward fulfillment; rhetorical urbanity works because it emulates this natural psycho-social process affectively through metaphor.

Thus, Aristotle proposes that, in the context of rhetoric, the most effective metaphors for persuasion are those that create or project *energeia*, or “actualization”—they most closely bring the audience to a point of being able to visualize the scene being described by virtue of the vividness of the language—it should elicit a *pro ommaton poiein*, or “bringing before the eyes” of the audience. Such metaphors contain a type of ontological *energy*, which is consistent with Kennedy’s claims that rhetoric itself “is apparently a form of energy that drives and is imparted to communication” (*Comparative* 215).<sup>8</sup> Aristotle uses violent examples from Homer to illustrate his concept (as Burke does with Matthew Arnold), which suggests that the type of action-infused metaphor he is referring to here is particularly apparent in literature. Hence, Aristotle, Kennedy and Burke all arrive at a similar conclusion—there is a latent energy in this type of rhetoric. Yet, as Aristotle warns in the *Metaphysics*, the tension between potentiality and actuality exists as a variable—“Every potentiality is at the same time a potentiality for the opposite” (9.8.15). What logically follows, as he later expands on in some detail, is that the completed actualization has the same lateral potential: “Everything of which we speak

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<sup>8</sup> Kennedy classifies Aristotle’s concept of *energeia* from *Rhetoric* 3.11 as a sort of primitive “awareness” of this (*Comparative* 215). The conservation of energy is central to Kennedy’s definition of rhetoric here, as explained previously; he regards it as more efficient than the use of physical force.

as capable is alike capable of contrary results; e.g., that which we call capable of being well is alike capable of being ill, and has both potentialities at once; for the same potentiality admits of health and disease” (9.9.1). Yet, in the matter of good versus evil, the lateral potential Aristotle describes in the opening paragraph shifts. He posits that all Being exists on a moral continuum; however,

in the case of evils the end or actuality must be worse than the potentiality; for that which is capable is capable alike of both contraries. Clearly, then, evil does not exist apart from things; for evil is by nature posterior to potentiality. Nor is there in things which are original and eternal any evil or error, or anything which has been destroyed—for destruction is an evil. (9.9.3)

Hence, the implication here is that inherent in the notion of *energeia* is potential for good, but a greater potential for evil. Burke echoes this warning with regard to his “Dramatism” theory which serves as “a technique of analysis of language and thought as basically modes of action rather than as means of conveying information” (“From” 1041):

There is a gloomy route, or this sort. If *action* is to be our key term, then *drama*; for drama is the culminative form of action. . . . But if *drama*, then *conflict*. And if *conflict*, then *victimage*. Dramatism is always on the edge of this vexing problem, that comes to a culmination in tragedy, the song of the scapegoat. (1041, Burke’s italics)

However, this concept from Aristotle was largely overlooked in the development of Western rhetoric due to emphasis of a similar concept built around its homonym,

*enargeia*, which developed as a concept in forensic rhetoric and, later, in Elizabethan poetic theory.

### ***Energeia* and the Western Rhetorical Tradition**

Aristotle's concept of *energeia* goes underground largely due to the fact that, as Kennedy notes, "although the *Rhetoric* was much read in the later Renaissance and although important scholarship on the text and the fine commentary of E. M. Cope appeared in the nineteenth century, real appreciation of the significance of the treatise is a phenomenon of twentieth-century interest in speech communication and critical theory" (*On* 308-9). Thus, Lawson-Tancred further observes, Aristotle's rhetoric was probably unavailable to the Roman masters from whom much of Western rhetorical theory is derived: "Cicero . . . is writing at a time when the works of Aristotle may have been only recently rediscovered, and he may not have known the *Rhetoric* at first hand" (*Art* 57). As a matter of course, Aristotle's thought on the *energeiac* metaphors becomes distilled in the works of later classical theorists, primarily in the homonym *εναργεια* (*enargeia*), meaning "vividness," which appears in the works of Cicero and Quintilian.

Cicero describes *enargeia* as the task of the orator to inflict pain and other strong emotions upon themselves as a prerequisite for conveying those emotions to an audience: "it is impossible for the listener to feel indignation, hatred or ill-will, to be terrified of anything, or reduced to tears of compassion, unless all those emotions, which the advocate would inspire in the arbitrator, are visibly stamped or rather branded on the advocate himself" (*De oratore*, II, 189). In a discussion of "that *enargeia* which Cicero

calls *illumination* and *actuality*, which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence,” Quintilian presents a situation in which a man is being tried for murder and asserts that the speaker should illustrate his or her argument by vividly rendering the murder scene for the audience:

Shall I not see the assassin burst suddenly from his hiding-place, the victim tremble, cry for help, beg for mercy, or turn to run? Shall I not see the fatal blow delivered and the stricken body fall? Will not the blood, the deathly pallor, the groan of agony, the death-rattle, be indelibly impressed upon my mind?” (6.2.31-32)

Quintilian’s example highlights the forensic rhetorical application of this concept; however, the theory re-emerged during the Renaissance movement, both Italian and British, as a significant concept in poetic theory.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Enargeia* makes an appearance in other classical texts on rhetoric; for example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides an excellent example of the quality of *enargeia* in his description of Lysias’ ability as a speaker to make his audience feel that they can “see the actions which are being described going on and that [they are] meeting face-to-face the characters in the orator’s story” (7). Also of note is Plutarch’s definition of *enargeia* from *Moralia*: “The best historian then is he who brings his narrative to life like a picture with emotions and personalities. Thucydides always strives after this vividness [*enargeia*], in his desire to make the hearer a spectator and to rouse in the reader’s mind all the emotions of dismay and disturbance which the eyewitness felt” (5). Longinus in “On the Sublime,” briefly discusses the rhetorical use of an image as “a case where, carried away by enthusiasm and passion, you think you see what you describe, and you place it before the eyes of your hearers” (XV.1). In point 2, he goes further to delineate between the poetic use of images (“enthralment”) and the rhetorical (“vivid description”), which he illustrates with a violent descriptive passage from Euripides’ *Orestes*. While Longinus’ concern with “vividness” is brief, it exists in the context of an entire essay on the “sublime”—and in that context, it is elucidated further.

The only work of Aristotle known in the west after the collapse of ancient civilization (approximately 500 AD) was Boethius's Latin translation of his treatise on logic. In the twelfth century after the conquest of Toledo, Arabic translations began to trickle into the hands of western European scholars, but it was not until the collapse of Constantinople in 1204 that Greek versions of Aristotle reappeared. Thomas Aquinas's integration of Aristotelian principles of reason and rational thought with Christian theology in his colossal *Summa Theologica* (1273) resulted in a much wider recognition of the philosopher and his work; nonetheless, as Hegel noted, "only after the Reformation was there a return to the original sources for Aristotle" in the field of philosophy (qtd. in Ferrarin 16).

During the Enlightenment, when texts from the classical period began to reemerge, *energeia* and *enargeia* were conflated and migrated from rhetorical to poetic and narrative theory. George Puttenham in his poetry manual, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), embraces *enargeia*, challenging poets to "maketh your information no lesse plausible to the minde than to the eare: no though you filled them with neuer so much sence and sententiousness" because "the minde is not assailable vnless it be by sensible approaches" (197). John Bender, in *Spenser and Literary Pictorialism*, explains Puttenham's translation and application of *enargeia* as the "power to evoke objects and scenes in the minds of his listeners by the use of vivid imagery" (8). Puttenham's work was highly influential and served as a primary source of theory for the progenitors of English prose and poesy during the formative Elizabethan, Renaissance and Restoration



eras and certainly reflects Aristotle's own understanding of the term as he describes it in the *Metaphysics*, the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*.<sup>10</sup>

### **Literary Criticism and Rhetorical Violence**

But how does *energeia* apply to the current conversation? On what grounds is it possible to use this rhetorical term to talk about literature and why is it necessary? The fact that Aristotle used literary references to illustrate his concept of *energeia* seems license enough; furthermore, Burke does so as well with regard to his related concept of transformation. Literature is traditionally the domain of English departments, which makes it a likely source for rhetorical study; however, the need to apply a study of rhetorical violence to literature goes beyond a relationship of convenience. Language, we are told by Hodge and Kress, is the conduit through which complexes and systems interact to define and interpret the social matrix. Text and discourse interact dynamically to reinforce and redefine meaning. Of text, specifically, they note, "A system is constantly being reproduced and reconstituted in texts. Otherwise it would cease to exist." As a result, texts both represent the "realization of sign systems" as well as the "site where change continually takes place." Discourse has a complementary function as the "site where social forms of organization engage with systems of signs in the production of texts, thus reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values which

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<sup>10</sup> Lanham, in *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, suggests that "it would make sense to use *enargeia* as the basic umbrella term for the various special terms for vigorous ocular demonstration, and *energeia* as a more general term for vigor and verve, of whatever sort, in expression."

make up a culture.” Meaning is constantly in flux, in other words, within the context of the give and take between the production of texts and the discourse that informs the social environment with new interpretations for signs and sign systems. Because these new interpretations result in “reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values which make up a culture,” then the rhetorical models that inform and promulgate those evolutionary and dynamic processes should necessarily be the topics of study for rhetoricians, whether in the form of discourse or text. To exclude fiction from the conversation would be to ignore Booth’s observation that “in fictional forms most of the important facts are simultaneously values, and to ignore the values is to turn the object studied into something less than itself” (*Rhetoric* 419). To do so is to accept truth and reality as purely arbitrary constructs arrived at by social agreement alone and to ignore the power of rhetoric to elicit such change. To assign to literature some degree of power to define those concepts on behalf of society is to risk *equating* rhetoric with truth and reality and turn a blind eye to its fundamental potential for deception. In either paradigm, what possible value is there to any form of criticism that does not hold literature accountable for the version of truth and reality that it advocates?

Only rhetorical criticism can serve as the vanguard in such an environment because it presupposes the use of the slight of hand, the parlor trick, the smoke and mirrors. Because these texts are often written from an agenda, it can be assumed that the use of specific rhetorical devices in their production is deliberate, and therefore, invites explication and analysis. As Plato described in the *Gorgias*, effective rhetoric is not dependent upon the veracity of the speaker’s claims but rather upon the speaker’s ability

to *move* a given audience.<sup>11</sup> Only by stripping these arguments of artifice is it possible to examine the claims in a truly critical fashion that these artists and works of art put forth. Hence, rhetorical theory provides a way around the epiphany, the insight, and the revelation by questioning how it was invoked and then stripping the implicit argument from the artifice used to deliver it, evaluates its validity as a standalone concept. Considering how effective rhetorical violence is in eliciting such emotional responses, it is imperative to presume that literature that makes use of it is deliberately rhetorical in nature; otherwise, the only standard for literary efficacy lies in the ability of a given work to move the reader emotionally toward a concept or premise and not the value of the premise itself.

Furthermore, rhetorical criticism provides a way to differentiate between “beneficial” and “harmful” applications of rhetorical violence (to borrow Girard’s terms) without the counterpoint moralizing typically used by social pundits—what Booth calls “the temptation of moralists to judge narratives by standards they might use in teaching a Sunday school class or conducting a court for juvenile offenders” (*Company* 7). Rhetorical criticism supplies a viable “new location for our debates” on the ethics of

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<sup>11</sup> Socrates argues that oratory (rhetoric) is not the “art of speech *par excellence*” (24) as Gorgias maintains, but rather a “knack” to be used by an individual for “convincing the ignorant that he knows more than the experts” (38). Socrates arrives at this by separating the practice of oratory from a standard for ethical behavior—that it can be used equally for ill as well as good because it is not contingent upon the truth but rather upon the ability of the speaker to speak convincingly. Hence, Socrates concludes his discussion with Gorgias with this statement: “Well, Gorgias, the whole of which oratory is a branch seems to me to be a pursuit which has nothing to do with art, but which requires in its practitioners a shrewd and bold spirit together with a natural aptitude for dealing with men. The generic name which I should give it is pandering; it has many subdivisions, one of which is cookery, an occupation which masquerades as an art but in my opinion is no more than a knack acquired by routine. . . . In my view oratory is a spurious counterfeit of a branch of the art of government” (44).

narrative that is capable of circumventing “the loaded labels and crude slogans that critics preoccupied with moral effects have too often employed” due to its native mechanism which seeks to strip away the artifice in order to observe the merit of the naked argument. As such, it also supplies a cogent rationale for identifying the significance of important literary works that is unencumbered by ephemeral explanations of art that are so often elitist in nature.

Texts that specifically use violent rhetoric to elicit paradigm shifts and the socio-political environments in which they are produced and seek to influence are the topics of this study. The context in question is 20<sup>th</sup> Century America. Because these works were written in the Modern and Postmodern periods, they share the common thread of existentialist theories of ontology.<sup>12</sup> Each of these texts fashion an agenda—not necessarily in the negative connotation of that term, but more in the sense of a “mission.” These authors are perpetuating a vision of being in the world as they perceive it to be coupled with either an overtly or covertly implied critique of that frame of reference. Their messages are coded into metaphors that endorse how they believe it “should” be. These metaphors are frequently and necessarily violent because these writers feel they are

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<sup>12</sup> The role of existentialism in the development of American literature cannot be understated, particularly with regard to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s formative role in the American Renaissance movement and in Nietzsche’s concept of “will to power.” Heidegger classified Nietzsche’s concept into three distinct categories: “Eternal Recurrence, Will to Power, Revaluation” (*Nietzsche I* 17). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche first introduced the idea that life is the will to power, and he who would truly live must overcome the beliefs and conventions of common men—he must become an “übermensch.” In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he fleshed out the concept of the “übermensch” noting that progress in life is possible only if there are men of action who have the courage to trust will and instinct; new values arise which go beyond conventional good and evil when the Will to Power asserts itself. Finally, Revaluation is the essence that this Being takes—the übermensch redefines his world by the Will to Power.

charged with the mission of exposing the very real dangers inherent to the culturally-defined moral assumptions that buttress these ways of being, of cultural self-definition. Violent metaphors are capable of cutting through all of the platitudes and anthems. It is a powerful tool for exposing what is implied but unspoken beneath our creeds about the way we truly define who we are and what it means to be human. By the rule of contrast, these writers seek to examine what is inhuman and how and why we dehumanize via our beliefs. The violence in their works functions to force readers to question their own contradictory beliefs. It is necessary in the same way that the sacrificial system was necessary—because it is very nearly impossible to make the reader assimilate these issues in any other way. No other rhetorical form carries equal impact. However, just as every writer's talent varies, the efficacy of their use of rhetorical violence varies as well—its use alone does not guarantee the argument's success.

I am not interested in violence as violence, but strictly those instances in which rhetorical violence is used to create a metaphoric relationship between characters or groups, each symbolic of some thought or belief system, that is intended to solicit a paradigm shift in the mind of the reader contingent upon the conflicting claims inherent to the polarities presented in the metaphor. It is my belief that texts are not only capable of changing the way the public at large thinks about issues, but also that they are among the most powerful catalysts behind social change. I concur with Burke's assessment that rhetorical violence is most often used to indicate and facilitate transformation, and I believe that this is the basic rationale behind the frequent use of it in American literature. America is still in the process of creating its own mythology; hence, we're in the process

of revaluation, which takes two forms: re-historicizing the past and re-imagining the present. Toni Morrison deftly illustrates this dynamic, formative quality in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, turning the old tale of the blind sage and the trickster children who seek to deceive her by asking if the bird in their hands is dead or alive into an invective against literary arrogance. The children in the story admonish the old woman:

You trivialize us and trivialize the bird that is not in our hands. Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong? You are an adult. The old one, the wise one. Stop thinking about saving your face. Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created. We will not blame you if your reach exceeds your grasp; if love so ignites your words they go down in flames and nothing is left but their scald. Or if, with the reticence of a surgeon's hands, your words suture only the places where blood might flow. We know you can never do it properly—once and for all. Passion is never enough; neither is skill. But try. For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief's wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear's caul. You, old woman, blessed with blindness, can speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is mediation.

("Nobel")

Discourse, text, fiction, non-fiction, poem, play, sermon, speech, advertisement, soundbite: all forms of human language exist to educe, to engage, to encourage, to evoke conversation. Ultimately, my purpose is this: If the motive behind rhetorical violence in American literature is, in keeping with Burke's assessment, transformative in nature, it is essential to assess that violence rhetorically, to ask what transformation is being proposed, and finally, to consider that proposal as an argument within the context of the metaphors used to present it—and in thereby doing, to take part in the conversation that these texts elicit.

## CHAPTER II

“JUST PURE FILTHY RIGHT DOWN TO THE GUTS”: PHILOSOPHICAL AND  
RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S *WISE BLOOD*

Flannery O’Connor’s systematic use of rhetorical violence adapts the grotesque style’s inherent “merging of the comic and tragic, resulting from [the] loss of faith in the moral universe essential to tragedy and in a rational social order essential to comedy” (Holman and Harmon 220) as a means of darkly satirizing the ideology with which she contends. Her rendering of the grotesque/gothic is highly unique—she had a tremendous gift for satirical, biting humor, and as such, her freaks are often comically freakish and highly unsympathetic in their obstinacy: the saying “cutting off your nose to spite your face” regularly describes their situation. As O’Connor notes, her characters are “freaks” who elucidate “*our* essential displacement” (*Mystery* 113). She intends that they—through their ugliness, brutality, obtuseness, and ambiguity—reveal what is freakish about the commonly-accepted ideologies that they represent, or in O’Connor’s words, “The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state” (113). Yet, in keeping with the common theme of this study—the irrationality of violence used rhetorically to construct metaphors that comment on the irrationality of the ideology in question—whatever violence befalls her characters does so as a natural consequence of the ideologies they espouse. By making her characters the victims of their own ideologies, O’Connor elucidates the ideology she



is promoting by antithesis and in doing so, causes these characters to play the fools for the reader, who shares many of the same ideologies with the them. In a personal letter, she stated, “I am interested in making up a good case for distortion, as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see” (*Habit* 79); hence, from a rhetorical perspective, O’Connor uses what Burke calls “identification” to establish common ground with her readers only to undermine the ideologies she feels they advocate. Her goal was to use violent representation in the midst of satire to expose what she believed to be the distortion of truth inherent to the contemporary social ideology of her times, and thus to condemn it in order to elevate by proxy the integrity of the Catholic ideology she championed.

O’Connor noted on multiple occasions that the characteristic rhetorical violence in her work is a product of the difficulty created by her philosophical task. Characterizing herself as a proponent of “Christian Realism,” and in a letter to her friend H., she explained her rationale for the violence as follows:

[I]f you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it’s the gas you breathe. If I hadn’t had the Church to fight it with or to tell me the necessity of fighting it, I would be the stinkiest logical positivist you ever saw right now. With such a current to write against it (the result) almost has to be negative. It does well just to be. (*Collected* 949)

Hence, the violence in O’Connor is her putting her characters on the Christian cross so that they might understand what the cross represents. It is her way of “returning [her] characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace” (Whitt 11). In

doing so, it is a device to move the reader toward the *something else*, that is the embodiment of the story's "mystery."

### **Conflicting Ideologies in *Wise Blood***

To pin down O'Connor's ideological concerns is an exercise in theo-philosophical needle-threading. On the one hand, in her personal correspondence, she is adamant that her "philosophical notions don't derive from Kierkegaard ... but from St. Thomas (*Collected* 897). However, her interest and familiarity with Thomism and the *Summa Theologica* would have made her an Aristotelian by proxy. And yet, her self-referential comment from the "Author's Note to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition" of *Wise Blood* as being one who was "congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations" (O'Connor, *Collected* 1265), is indicative of the fact that although she may not have been a formal student of philosophy, she had the sort of intellectual acuity to gather the basic tenets of existentialism from her interactions with those in her artistic circle of influence as well as her own interpretations of literature. In a letter from later in her life, she asserted,

I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement. However, I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this *within* the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level. (*Collected* 942)

Consequently, at the heart of O'Connor's art was her perception that the purpose of her art was the rhetorical mission of revaluation—the “burden for the conscious Catholic” to expose the contradiction in the “contemporary situation at the ultimate level.”

O'Connor explains her rationale for her use of the grotesque in the essay, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” describing herself as a type of writer who perceives of human existence in terms of the “mystery” inherent to living in a “created order” governed by certain “laws,” or “concrete” assumptions, of that order (*Collected* 816). Such a writer, she posits, will produce a type of fiction that “will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery” because its possible meaning does not “begin except at a depth where the adequate motivation and the adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted.” This fiction is centered in “what we don't understand rather than in what we do”; hence, necessarily, it will be peopled with “characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves.” As such, O'Connor asserts that the writer who embraces this mystery will instinctively be driven to produce in the grotesque mode because, essentially, the quality of mystery is that it is outside of the realm of the normal cognition:

[T]he kind of writer I am describing will use the concrete in a more drastic way. His way will much more obviously be the way of distortion. . . . He's looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees. It's not really necessary to point out that the look of this fiction is going to be wild, that it

is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine. (816)

The combination of two incompatible points O'Connor is referring to is Aristotle's vivid metaphor, or what she describes elsewhere as the phenomenon where in "the eye sees what it has been given to see by concrete circumstances, and ... the imagination reproduces what by some related gift it is able to make live" (854). Furthermore, she notes that this metaphor will necessarily be "violent and comic" because of the incongruity of the two images being forced together.

Christian doctrine revolves around a paradox—that God became a man who gave his life as a propitiatory sacrifice in order to reconcile humankind to himself. The "divine mystery" that is behind O'Connor's work is based on the Judeo-Christian doctrine of God's holiness. The Hebrew adjective for "holy" (*qadosh*) literally means "marked off" or "separate," and is derived from a common verb meaning "to cut off" or "to separate." It is used to communicate the concept of transcendence, or the radical alterity of God as completely *other* than human; quintessentially, to be human is to be *un*-God. God is the epitome of goodness and purity, and therefore, that which is *to any degree* un-good or un-pure cannot logically coexist in his presence, and it is this absolute quality of God's holiness that makes his presence dangerous. He is so *ultra*-good and *ultra*-pure that there is no reference in human experience to either comprehend or coexist with God outside his own divine sanctions—"revelation" and "grace"—both of which find their fullest manifestations in the person of the God-man, Christ. O'Connor sees her task as a Catholic novelist to explore this essential paradox, or "mystery," of that faith and to lead her

readers to a point of confrontation with that paradox as well. Because the concept of God's holiness is without reference in human experience, as O'Connor notes, her rhetorical goal is to shock her readers, and in thereby doing, to give them a glimpse of this "mystery" vicariously through the violence experienced by her characters:

In my stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (*Mystery* 112)

Implied in the statement, of course, is O'Connor's beliefs about her readership as well—in what she sees as the cultural malaise induced by the "nihilism" that is so pervasive it is the very air we "breathe" (O'Connor, *Collected* 949), wouldn't such a readership be "hardheaded" as well? Or, as she admonished her audience before her reading of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" at Hollins College in 1963, "you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies" (*Mystery* 113).

For the rhetorical novelist, persuading the audience is the primary aim. In her famous essay, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," she argued that she wrote for an audience who did not share her belief in the fall of humanity and its need for redemption, and as such, required the use of extraordinary measures to overcome that misguided conviction:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience.

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.

(*Collected* 806)

The rhetorical rationale for O'Connor, then, is to use the grotesque and the violent metaphor to force her audience to recognize what she regards to be the full implications behind the primary ideologies that guide modern consciousness. She pushes them to pursue the truth statements behind the ideology to its logical end in order to invoke a cathartic revelation that revalues the *energaieic* force of the violence *toward* the ideology-in-question, and *away from* the contrary proposition (the Catholic faith) and in thereby doing, present it as the only logical alternative, the “true” ideology. O'Connor expresses this phenomenon as follows: “I can’t allow any of my characters, in a novel anyway, to stop in some halfway position. This doubtless comes of a Catholic education and a Catholic sense of history—everything works toward its true end or away from it, everything is ultimately saved or lost” (*Habit* 349-50). Clearly, her goal is to revalue the actions of her characters by flipping the *energaieic* value of the violence they perpetrate and experience so as to reveal the illogic of the ideology they represent.

O'Connor notes that as a "Christian" writer, the underlying assumptions of the popular ideology are "repugnant" to her, and therefore what is perceived in her work as "grotesque" is actually "natural" to her—it is not so much an inversion as it is a different perspective altogether. As such, her grotesques are hyperbolic—they are not allowed the courtesy of masks, but must always reveal their "true" selves. This perspective is apparent in her harsh condemnation of the concept of "compassion" in literature:

It is considered an absolute necessity these days for a writer to have compassion.

Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody's mouth and which no book jacket can do without. It is a quality which no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense, so it is always safe for anybody to use. Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human. The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything. Certainly when the grotesque is used in a legitimate way, the intellectual and moral judgments implicit in it will have the ascendancy over feeling. (*Collected* 817)

Her disdain for this type of "compassion" is due to her perception that it "excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human," which, of course, is characteristic of the malaise that she understands her audience to be immersed in. "Compassion" has another meaning for O'Connor, who believes that the Christ event is the central defining episode in human existence. As such, the violences that she inflicts upon her characters are evidence of what C.S. Lewis calls "severe mercy," or God's providential ability to prevent human suffering and death, but chooses not to for a greater good, whether or not

the sufferer is cognizant of it—something she would have been intimately familiar with as a victim of lupus, which ultimately ended her life. The violence, she has said, is preparing her characters for their “moment of grace”; consequently, “compassion” for O’Connor often takes the form of violence because, if her ideology is correct—if violent death is required to force the character to receive grace—then violent death is more compassionate than passive life.

Therefore, O’Connor’s characters are grotesque because that best represents what she regards to be their natural state in a world infused with nihilism: total depravity. She does not permit them any sympathy—in her estimation, they get what we *all* deserve—and the ultimate end is this “moment of grace,” or gestalt experience that provides a metaphysical insight unavailable by any other means. However, for O’Connor to be successful, her readers must accept that her characters are “freaks” who elucidate “*our* essential displacement”—they must be able to see something of themselves in her freakish characters, and it is this vast incongruence between the poles of her metaphors that have always made her works both difficult and fascinating. This motive lies behind all of her works, and is particularly obvious in the characters that people her first novel, *Wise Blood*.

### **Causal Connection**

In the “Author’s Note to the Second Edition” of *Wise Blood*, O’Connor’s calls her protagonist, Hazel Motes, a “Christian *malgré lui*” (*Collected* 1265).<sup>1</sup> He is a violent, bitter man who is marked as a prophet, but who is driven by his inability to discern



metaphysical insights and fear of death to exert all of his efforts to escape the Christian faith. His escape route of choice is existentialist-based nihilism (the belief in “nothing”), which leads him to spiral further and further into lawlessness, debauchery and purely sociopathic behavior; however, he ultimately returns to the Christian faith “in spite of himself.” An idealist, Motes is consumed by a genuine need to know the “truth” — something O’Connor calls his “integrity”—and this serves as the rationale behind his insistence upon clinging to the tenets of nihilism, even when doing so proves to be illogical.<sup>2</sup> O’Connor uses rhetorical violence to establish the motive behind his actions, to emphasize the failure of the ideology he embraces in his attempt to negate his Christian faith, and ultimately, to return him to that faith and the fulfillment of his “*absolute integrity*” (920, *italics mine*).

O’Connor begins building her argument in the first chapter by establishing that Motes is incapable of discerning any sort of metaphysical concept. The way she does so is to provide expository information about Motes in a dream sequence where in she recounts his memories of his family members’ funerals. Within this context, she makes steady use of rhetorical violence to create the sense of fear and dread of the unknown that fuels Mote’s rejection of the religion he was raised with but cannot possibly understand its metaphysical dimension. Rhetorically, she uses all of the persuasive potential of the

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<sup>1</sup> *malgré lui* is literally “in spite of himself.”

<sup>2</sup> O’Connor states in a letter to Ben Griffith, “Of course, I think of Haze Motes as a kind of saint. His overwhelming virtue is his integrity” (O’Connor, *Collected* 941). Hazel Motes epitomizes Sherwood Anderson’s description of a “grotesque” in “The Book of the Grotesque” prologue to *Winesburg, Ohio*: ‘It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood’ (24).

naturally disturbing qualities inherent to death and funerals as a means of explaining Motes's metaphysical incapacitation *except* compassion. While the exposition ultimately does render a pathetic appeal, it is one based in terror rather than sympathy. She accomplishes this with four rhetorical techniques: (1) She renders these harrowing, naturally pitiable scenes in stilted, unemotional language that focuses on mundane rather than compassionate details; (2) she infuses gallows humor which function to further blunt any inherent pathos into the descriptions of the grandfather, the father, and in Hazel's observations; (3) she uses animalistic metaphors to describe the people and events which elucidate Hazel's inability to perceive or properly interpret metaphysical concepts; (4) she moves the narrative from the ridiculous (in the account of the father) to the terrifying (in the account of the mother). The result of the expository section is that O'Connor creates a dispassionate response in the reader to Motes while setting up a rationale for his actions to follow: she defines the protagonist as a man without any familial connections who is motivated in all of his actions by fear of the ultimate reality of death.

Hazel is constantly surprised at each funeral that the dead person does not rise, which is in keeping with his inability to comprehend the metaphysical. When his grandfather died, Hazel watched the open casket from a distance, thinking, "he ain't gonna let them shut it on him; when the time comes, his elbow's going to shoot into the crack" (9), but when it did happen, "he didn't make a move" (10). When his brother was killed in a mowing machine accident, Hazel lifted the lid of the coffin because "he had thought, what if he had been in it and they had shut it on him." He dreams that his father was buried with his "can in the air" to keep the lid from being shut on him, but it was shut

nonetheless (10). The vividness of the implied violence with which O'Connor recounts each episode makes the reader flinch and recoil on Hazel's behalf, although apparently, he never does so himself. Consider the full context of her account of the burial of Hazel's brothers:

Haze had had two younger brothers; one died in infancy and was put in a small box. The other fell in front of a mowing machine when he was seven. His box was about half the size of an ordinary one, and when they shut it, Haze ran and opened it up again. They said it was because he was heartbroken to part with his brother, but it was not; it was because he had thought, what if he had been in it and they had shut it on him.

The details O'Connor drops into the first three short sentences are highly loaded with dramatic impact: she tells the reader about the death of an infant, the violent death of a child, and another child's emotionally-motivated response to the event. Consider that the death of an infant is an intensely powerful emotional event in and of itself, but that coupled with the death of the other child is very nearly emotionally overwhelming; yet O'Connor's stilted, almost technical, language qualifies what might otherwise be morose. The focus here is on casket size and all of the other details are ancillary in the construction—even the cause of death for the seven year old. Nonetheless, regardless of whether or not the reader is familiar enough with farm equipment to know what a mowing machine is, O'Connor has deftly inserted a visual image into his or her mind of what young Hazel sees when he opens his brother's coffin. A mowing machine is a farming implement that attaches to the drive train of a tractor. It is composed of two flat

bars approximately ten feet long that are joined together, setting about three inches off the ground perpendicular to the path of the tractor. Each bar has a series of “teeth,” or triangular pieces of metal attached to the cutting edge—the cutting motion produced is like that of an electric knife wherein the serrated edges are constantly moving in opposing directions. Considering the power of a tractor and the difficulty in stopping one suddenly, Hazel’s brother would likely have been cut in half lengthwise in such an accident. This reference to the reduced size of the coffin could be because it is for a child—but it suggests in the vagueness of the qualifier “ordinary” (ordinary for an adult, or for a child?) that it could be because the remains are in pieces. How could such a corpse experience resurrection if it was in pieces? Yet, this paragraph exemplifies precisely O’Connor’s methodology for loading the atmosphere from which her characters draw their personalities. Understated as it is, this particular instance no doubt influences the image of his mother at her burial that he later derives and also informs his obvious fear of death and the harbinger of that, the Christ-monster, he pictures as the “wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown” (11).

The primary defining rhetorical violence in the expository section that O’Connor uses to develop Motes’s spiritual dysfunction revolves around his mother. While the other accounts of death and funerals are delivered realistically, the accounts regarding his mother are gothic in nature—full of frightening animalistic, non-realistic, grotesque imagery. Haze’s memories of his mother are focused on two parallel events—the first

being her funeral. In the dream he has while sleeping in a berth on the train to Taulkinham, Hazel remembers seeing his mother's face for the last time:

He had seen her face through the crack [of her coffin] when they were shutting the top on her. He was sixteen then. He had seen the shadow that came down over her face and pulled her mouth down as if she wasn't any more satisfied dead than alive, as if she were going to spring up and shove the lid back and fly out and satisfy herself: but they shut it. She might have been going to fly out of there, she might have been going to spring. He saw her in his sleep, terrible, like a huge bat, dart from the closing, fly out of there, but it was falling dark on top of her, closing down all the time. From inside he saw it closing, coming closer closer down and cutting off the light and the room. He opened his eyes and saw it closing and he sprang up between the crack and wedged his head and shoulders through it and hung there, dizzy, with the dim light of the train slowly showing the rug below.

(14)

As is the case in the previous scene of Hazel's memories of his brother's burial, there is no possible opportunity for melodrama in the scene: if Hazel feels any sadness or loss, there is nothing to indicate it; rather what he feels is the fear and revulsion of absolute alterity in that he is witnessing something that he is totally outside the scope of his sensory perception, or what Reisman calls a "mismatch of schema" (6): a phenomenon O'Connor creates through animalistic rhetoric. He anticipates that his mother will burst forth from the coffin and fly; however, what he imagines is not angelic but *bat*-like—not the "new body" of resurrection, but *something* vividly animalistic in a particularly

repulsive “rodent-like” way perhaps, but decidedly *not* recognizably human. Her shriveled and drawn corpse represents something completely *other* to him—a mystery that is beyond his cognition that he *fears* and seeks to avoid at all costs. Naturally, the product of salvation from the Christ-monster who haunts his imagination would be a monstrosity. Consequently, when in his dream, he exchanges places with his mother’s corpse, he accomplishes what it cannot by literally propelling himself out of the berth. On a basic cognitive level, O’Connor is able to communicate that his reaction indicates his rejection of his mother’s faith as a basic life philosophy because by remaining dead, by not flying from the coffin, she invalidated what he understands the concept of redemption to be because he cannot imagine it in metaphysical terms. Equally important, however, is the horrifying manifestation that he imagines it *would* be in the event that it was true. The rhetorical effect that O’Connor achieves is that the reader not only comprehends her protagonist’s inability to grasp the Christian concept of the afterlife, but also *feels* his confusion and terror.

The second memory of his mother provides the context for the first; it also involves a coffin and is a metaphoric representation of the concept of original sin. Rhetorically, O’Connor combines animalistic, psychological and theological themes to this end. When he is ten years old, Hazel’s father takes him to a carnival in a neighboring town where he witnesses a sideshow portraying something “so SINSational that it would cost any man that wanted to see it thirty-five cents, and it was so EXclusive, only fifteen could get in at a time” (34). With a child’s reasoning, he determines that the sideshow must be prurient in nature, and speculates: “it’s something about a privy . . . . It’s some

men in a privy. Then he thought, maybe it's a man and a woman in a privy. She wouldn't want me in there. 'I got fifteen cents,' he said." Hazel perceives that whatever is in the tent is "dirty," and that there is a transgression involved ("she wouldn't want me in there"). Yet, there is no hesitation between his recognition of the transgression and his choice to commit it ("I got fifteen cents"). Once he persuades the barker to let him in, he witnesses the following scene:

They were looking down into a lowered place where something white was lying, squirming a little, in a box lined with black cloth. For a second he thought it was a skinned animal and then he saw it was a woman. She was fat and she had a face like an ordinary woman except there was a mole on the corner of her lip, that moved when she grinned, and one on her side. (35)

As with the episode with his mother, Haze experiences a mismatch of schema—he cannot determine what he's looking at. Initially, he judges it to be a "skinned animal" before recognizing it as a woman, which corresponds with the "bat-like" description of his mother—it is a repulsive animalistic image, but not threatening. Clearly, however, his reaction has nothing to do with the sin of lust—he is an innocent observing something he knows is wrong, but he is not cognitively participating in what is explicitly "sinful" about it. He hears a voice from the front of the crowd that he recognizes as his father's say, "Had one of themther built into ever' casket . . . be a heap ready to go sooner." After returning home, he sees his mother and then immediately hides but feels "her watching him through the tree" (35). He then imagines her in the casket: "he saw the lowered place and the casket again and a thin woman in the casket who was too long for it. Her head

stuck up at one end and her knees were raised to make her fit. She had a cross-shaped face” (35). The replacement of the woman in the box with his mother can be read as an Oedipal crisis, particularly with regard to his father’s licentious comment; however, the reference to her “cross-shaped face,” and her position as omniscient “God” in the Garden of Eden indicates that the crisis is actually one of faith.<sup>3</sup> It is at this point of his first awareness of sin that he is forced to choose to accept or reject his mother’s concept of redemption—an essentially faith-based decision about a metaphysical concept. His mother is able to determine by his behavior that he has done something wrong and beats him with a stick, telling him, “Jesus died to redeem you,” to which Haze replies, “I never ast him” (36). As a result, “he forgot the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him.” Hence, the episode represents the point at which Hazel comes to recognize his complicity in Original Sin, or the “nameless unplaced guilt” (36), which is, of course, conflates this theological notion with the existentialist concept of “homelessness” (Nietzsche) or “angst” (Heidegger). His reaction to it is to walk for a mile with sharp rocks in his shoes, hoping that this natural act of penitence will “satisfy Him” because he has too much integrity to accept his mother’s solution, and once again instinctively attempts to rectify the metaphysical debt himself in a non-metaphysical manner.

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to John Hawkes, O’Connor states that the “cross-shaped face” means that the character is “marked out for the Lord—or at least marked out as one who will have the struggle, who will know what the choice is—either throw away everything and follow Him or enjoy yourself by doing some meanness to somebody, and in the end, there’s no pleasure in life, not even in meanness” (*Habit* 350). Note: the phrase after the second dash is a direct quotation of the philosophy of the Misfit from her short story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”



In these parallel scenes, O'Connor provides two alternative perspectives on death, or more specifically, life-after-death, that Hazel must consider. His mother's corpse is in one sense highly realistic, and from that perspective, it attests to the ugliness and finality of the death of the body. However, the second perspective (which actually occurs six years prior to his mother's death), informs his perspective on the death of his mother. His father's prurient comment about the naked woman in the coffin also makes the underlying assumption of life-after-death—that one would have to be “alive” to enjoy the sexual potential she represents. However, it is also clearly symbolic of a trap, wherein the naked woman serves as bait, but to retrieve the bait results in death, or the inability to experience the implied-reward. The multi-layered symbolism of both events results in confusion for Hazel, who does not see any intrinsic manifestation of the faith propositions that promise eternal life. The replacement of the naked woman in the coffin with his mother parallels his replacement of his mother in the coffin with himself. Hence, it is the natural result of life that Hazel sees most clearly, and he cannot reconcile it with the teachings of religion to which he has been exposed. Thus, Hazel's “problem” is that he cannot understand metaphysical concepts. He is the icon of Hegel's Dialectic—he can only process the phenomenon available to him through the five senses, and the metaphysical is completely beyond his grasp. The rhetorical point, for O'Connor, is to relate to the reader the foreignness of the concepts with which Hazel struggles. Her task is to dispense with any of the “hazy compassion” that her readers may possess with regard to God, heaven and an afterlife. She forces them through these violent rhetorical constructs to look at these concepts in their concrete realities—the inevitability of death,

the corruption of the corpse, the problem of human suffering, the collapse of moral absolutes, and the innate drive of the individual to reconcile them in the search for ontological verification in a post-Christian world.

While these concepts are at the heart of O'Connor's argument, her rhetorical task requires that she communicate these ideas on an emotional level. Consequently, it is the second scene that informs and ultimately fulfills the first. His father's observations are significant, not only because he identifies the "box" the woman is in as a casket, but also because, as the other parent, his words constitute the endorsement of an alternative approach to ontology. The irony is, of course, that the woman in the box, who obviously represents the relationship between sin and death, is alive, but when he transfers the image to his mother, she appears to be dead. However, Hazel cannot separate the two, and when he returns home, his act of hiding from his mother is reminiscent of Adam hiding from God in the Garden of Eden after the Fall. The beating he sustains from her, in that context, suggests God's wrath rather than Christ's forgiveness; however, Hazel, even as a child, recognizes that there is a spiritual debt to be paid, and he refuses to accept punishment from an external source—he insists on punishing himself by self-mutilation. O'Connor notes of this passage,

He walks a mile with rocks in his shoes to make up for looking at the woman in the sideshow coffin. The Redemption creates a debt that has to be paid. (This is a fact to anybody who believes he has been redeemed by Christ.) The Redemption simply changes everything. The fact is that try as he will Haze cannot get rid of his sense of debt and his inner vision of Christ. (*Collected* 920)

O'Connor's explanation helps to illuminate the difficulty of the passage in question in that she is attempting to communicate an extremely deep theological concept to an audience where few possess the theological education to grasp the significance—and this is precisely why she relies on the violent rhetoric here to make her point emotionally rather than cognitively. This self-inflicted violence foreshadows the self-mutilation Hazel returns to at the end of the novel, which eventually results in his death, but which O'Connor regards to be the fulfillment of his “absolute integrity” (920). To comprehend what she means by that requires that the audience buy into Hazel's innate sense of guilt, so much so that they understand his death as a resolution—something that can only be accomplished if they are able to have some sense of how deeply Hazel *feels* his “sense of debt” (920). This is, of course, precisely the way the rhetorical violence functions in this context—up to this point, O'Connor has carefully loaded the accounts of Hazel's family members' funerals with alterity and bizarre animalistic images, but has conscientiously denied the reader any opportunity to feel compassion toward her protagonist. In second scene, however, as his mother beats him “across the legs with [a] stick” (36), the cruelty of her act coupled with his deliberate act of penitence suddenly opens the possibility of a compassionate response toward the character and serves to redefine the previous instances related in the exposition. Now, instead of being the weird kid at the freakshow-like funerals, he is just an ordinary child exposed to a carnival freak show, who must then endure abuse for a sin he didn't really commit, but nonetheless, feels shame and remorse and seeks to take responsibility for it himself. What reader would not want to rescue this child, or would not feel the tinge of childhood guilt at disappointing a parent and the

confusion of not understanding exactly how the transgression was made? In characteristic style, O'Connor opens the possibility of compassion here only to slam it shut like a coffin lid.

Having established the rationale behind her protagonist's vehement rejection of the Christian faith, she places him on his journey to enlightenment which involves him becoming more deeply entrenched in the implications of nihilism. After the deaths of his family members, what Hazel takes to the army is a sort of Manichean dualism that separates the world into pure good and pure evil. When he confronts his fellow soldiers over an issue of morality, intending to tell them "he was going to be a preacher of the gospel and that he wasn't going to have his soul damned by the government or by any foreign place it sent him to," they respond by telling him that he has no soul, which throws him into turmoil "because he wanted to believe them. All he wanted was to believe them and get rid of it once and for all, and he saw the opportunity here to get rid of it without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of to evil" (12). He returns from his violent tour of duty, wounded, isolated and "forgotten," but nonetheless "pleased to think that he was still uncorrupted," which indicates his inability to relinquish his hold on the religious ideology of his upbringing after all (13). He may not understand his own religious tradition, but he nonetheless uses it as an anchoring point from which (and against which) all of his other attempts at understanding himself in the world are derived.

Throughout the rest of the novel, Hazel is fleeing from death, or the ultimate confrontation with Jesus, and his escape from the berth is propelled by the implications of his dream, or rather his desire to escape. The escape motif introduced in the train ride

reappears in the form of his “high rat-colored car,” the Essex.<sup>4</sup> Haze’s desperate attempt to escape from Jesus drives him ever deeper into the rationalization he acquired from his fellow soldiers. Instinctively, he assumes that his new religion must necessarily be in opposition to Christianity, or as he posits, “the only way to truth is through blasphemy” (84)—which represents his next ideological step deeper into nihilism. Hence, O’Connor is explicating the development of nihilism as a foil to Christianity, and as Haze’s perception expands, the implications of his choices drive him to other choices that he reacts against with similar contradiction to Christian ideals. Naturally, as O’Connor moves Hazel into more socially reprehensible forms of “blasphemy,” he comes to confront greater and greater violences-as-violations of human dignity; thus, it is through transgression that Haze comes ultimately to the realization O’Connor intends for him to obtain. However, it is only by pushing nihilism to its *absolute* ends that he is capable of the gestalt that allows him to finally reject it in favor of the Christian faith.

The implicit violence in the novel turns explicit through Hazel’s interactions with the other significant minor characters who serve as foils to him: Asa and Sabbath Lily Hawks, Enoch Emery, and Solace Layfield. These characters bring about the full implications behind the system of beliefs that Hazel is trying so desperately to embrace. While he preaches from the hood of his “high rat-colored car” that blasphemy is the only way to truth, and deliberately pursues “sin” to confirm this, his uniqueness lies in the fact

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<sup>4</sup> O’Connor’s love of wordplay is evident in the name of Motes’s car—“Essex” must be an allusion to the road of excess that Hazel is traveling down.

that his transgressions are not driven by any other motive than volition—he transgresses because it *is* transgression, which undermines the psychological motives of the given actions that make them “sinful” in the first place. As such, Haze’s actions have the effect of confirming by negation what he is so vehemently denying.<sup>5</sup> Asa Hawks, the pseudo-blind prophet, serves as a foil to Hazel in two ways—first by metaphorically representing Hazel’s own “blindness” as something that is a matter of the will rather than a reality. For Hawks, the incident in which he attempted to blind himself with lime marked his own moment of gestalt, or confrontation with divine grace:

Ten years ago at a revival he had intended to blind himself and two hundred people or more were there, waiting for him to do it. He had preached for an hour on the blindness of Paul, working himself up until he saw himself struck blind by a Divine flash of lightning and, with courage enough then, he had thrust his hands into the bucket of wet lime and streaked them down his face; but he hadn’t been able to let any of it get into his eyes. He had been possessed of as many devils as were necessary to do it, but at that instant, they disappeared, and he saw himself standing there as he was. He fancied Jesus, Who had expelled them, was standing there too, beckoning to him; and he had fled out of the tent into the alley and disappeared. (59)

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<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Carl Hartman, O’Connor notes, “Haze himself is without any specific sin in the catalogue sense” (O’Connor, *Collected* 920). Throughout the novel, Hazel certainly willfully commits “sins” in the catalogue sense—but he is “without any specific sin” because of his “integrity”—essentially, he commits them not because he is tempted, but because to do so is to fulfill his chosen life philosophy. As such, his actions cannot be classified as “sinful” in the religious sense, reprehensible as they are.

Thus, for Hawks, the opportunity for self-actualization results in his fleeing from “Jesus” in the same manner that Hazel flees from the “wild ragged figure”; yet, he is unable to blind himself because at the moment of doing so, he has an epiphany that results in an unavoidable choice—he must either accept that revelation and all that it entails, or willfully turn against it. Either choice leaves him irrevocably changed because to ignore the revelation means that he can no longer function under the illusion of truth that has been the basis of his life up until this point. To continue being the “evangelist” means that he must do so in full awareness of the fact that it is a lie. To deny the truth is to negate the self, leading to self-destruction. It is this premise that is the point of Hawk’s act, and inasmuch as this pivotal act of physical self-mutilation, in O’Connor’s estimate, brought him to the nexus of “redemption,” his rejection of that opportunity resulted in his spiritual self-mutilation and ultimate corruption. Hence, the physical violence in the scene serves to inform the spiritual violence Hawk’s choice wreaked upon his own soul.

Furthermore, this violent act and the fact that Hawks drew a record crowd to witness his self-mutilation serves as a satirical metaphor for the entire novel in that Hazel’s violent journey to self-actualization uses a similar appeal for the reader. While she “possesses” Hazel and her other characters with “many devils” to render their plight, she is also directing the reader to interpretation: Hawk’s act of blinding himself, we are told, was diabolical because in order to fulfill it, he had to be “possessed of many devils.” However, when “Jesus” appears, the devils are dispersed, the act is revalued and Hawks is left to either acknowledge “himself standing there as he was,” without the trappings of religion, and decide whether or not to acquiesce to Christ “beckoning to him” or flee—

O'Connor is saying to her readers, we all must choose to whether to assent or flee with the implication being that to flee results in a parody of existence (59). Hawks also serves as a foil to Hazel's grandfather, who was a preacher in the same vein; however, Hawks loses his integrity because he did not have the courage to carry his ideology to its absolute ends. Coupled with Sabbath Lily, his illegitimate daughter, they both serve as a foil to Hazel's mother and himself and foreshadow what he could become. Hazel, however, cannot see that Hawks is simply a bitter reflection of himself, preaching a truth that he cannot believe either because he is unable to distinguish between Hawks' appearance and his own reality.

Hazel's relationship with Mrs. Leora Watts of 60 Buckley Road, possessor of the "friendliest bed in town" (16), is relatively innocent compared to the one he has with Sabbath. Watts is clearly intended to represent the woman in the coffin Hazel witnesses at the Melsey carnival—plump and playfully licentious, she is his first deliberate foray into "blasphemy," and as such, indicates two aspects of the nature of evil: paradoxically, it is appealing and unappealing at the same time. Given that he approaches her out of a desire to transgress for the sake of transgression rather than any actual prurient interest, even her innately lascivious status as a prostitute is rendered void—as such, she is merely unattractive. Hazel's affair with her ends in a ludicrous fashion when Watts gets up while Hazel is sleeping and "cut[s] the top of his hat out in an obscene shape" (62). This ridiculous violation, like a parody of the scarlet letter, brands upon the symbol of his connection with his grandfather's faith—the "Jesus-seeing hat"—a mark of disgrace,



which would be of no consequence if Hazel truly accepted nihilism; however, his reaction of ending the relationship indicates that he in fact does not.

It is his lack of insight into his own motives that drives Hazel to pursue and “seduce Hawks’ child, representing a third step in his descent into greater nihilism. His decision to seduce Sabbath Hawks occurs because he is disgusted with Watts due to the hat incident: “he had had enough of her” (62). Originally, in his relationship with Watts, Haze’s sin was internalized self-abasement. His intent with Sabbath, however, is externalized; hence, he has progressed from degradation to dehumanization. Hazel believes that “when the blind preacher saw his daughter ruined, he would realize that he was in earnest when he said he preached The Church Without Christ” (62). Hazel mistakenly assumes “that the blind man’s child, since she was so homely, would also be innocent,” but much to his disgust and dismay, he quickly discovers that she is much more familiar with the ways of blasphemy than he is. In fact, his pursuit of her immediately becomes her pursuit of him—Sabbath is attracted to Hazel because of his defiant transgression, or as she says, “That innocent look don’t hide a thing, [you’re] just pure filthy right down to the guts, like me. The only difference is I like being that way and [you] don’t” (95). Sabbath then asks Hazel if he wants “to learn how to like it” (95), and he answers “Yeah”; however, learning how “to like it” is something his absolute integrity will not permit. Sabbath, like her father, is a foil to Hazel, and she represents the mirror opposite of his true nature. She is a nihilist *because* she is “pure filthy right down to the guts.” It is a product of her nature—the mirror opposite of Hazel, she is purely evil. Her name, Sabbath Lily, is in itself blasphemous considering her salaciousness and the fact

that she is a “bastard” (66), and in keeping with the “blasphemy” that Hazel is pursuing, she represents an inversion of all that is good about human sexuality.

Central to this inversion is Sabbath’s latent reproductive potential in contrast to Watts. She twice relates to Hazel stories of infanticide, indicating that—even though she reports them as if they happened to someone else—they plague her conscience. In fact, while both instances sound like urban legends, Sabbath’s obsession with them suggests that she is expressing her own guilt and remorse by layering the reality into fantasy:

“Listen,” she said [to Hazel] in a louder voice, “this here man and woman killed this little baby. It was her own child but it was ugly and she never give it any love. This child had Jesus and this woman didn’t have nothing but good looks and a man she was living in sin with. She sent the child away and it come back and she it away again and ever’ time she sent it away, it come back to where her and this man was living in sin. They strangled it with a silk stocking and hung it up in the chimney. It didn’t give her any peace after that, though. Everything she looked at was that child. Jesus made it beautiful to haunt her. She couldn’t lie with this man without she saw it, staring through the chimney at her, shining through the brick in the middle of the night.” (28).

In the second story, Sabbath relates an incident of a little girl “that nobody cared if it lived or died” (69) who is passed around among relatives until finally landing in the guardianship of a “very evil” grandmother. The child is severely abused by the woman who eventually murders her by hanging her down a well, which sounds remarkably similar to the child hanging in the chimney from the first story. Whether the stories are

merely urban legends or thinly disguised accounts of Sabbath's own actions, they foreshadow the event with the "new Jesus" mummy, which she refers to as her and Hazel's child, as well as Hazel's destruction of the mummy. Hence, Sabbath is the ultimate manifestation of the naked woman in the coffin that the child-Hazel witnessed at the carnival in Melsey in the sense that the product of their fornication is something dead (because "the wages of sin is death"). O'Connor's deft transference of Haze's comically naïve-but-determined relationship with Watts to one of dehumanization and disgust with Hawks is a stunning rhetorical feat. The two violent episodes Sabbath relates to Hazel have the effect of making the reader feel the depth of depravity she represents, and like Hazel, distrust and be repulsed by her. As such, his relationship with Sabbath also represents the ultimate failure of his attempt to fully embrace nihilism. Furthermore, they not only foreshadow but provide the frame for interpreting Hazel's destruction of the "new Jesus."

If Sabbath Hawks represents the full implications of Hazel's deliberate acts of transgression, the ludicrous Enoch Emery<sup>6</sup> represents the full implications of his "humanity-without-God" ideology, or that without the soul, human beings are ultimately animals. Enoch functions as the fool, the comic foil, who amplifies the actions of Hazel by proxy. He, like Hazel, has "wise blood," which gives him "special knowledge" about

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<sup>6</sup> His name is another example of O'Connor's enjoyment of wordplay—Enoch is a reference to the prophet Enoch mentioned in Jude 14 in reference to the Gnostic heresy, and "Emery" connotes abrasiveness; hence, the idea of Gnosis, or "special knowledge" is consistent with the idea of "wise blood," which is a phrase/concept that Enoch alone uses, and his last name is obviously in reference to his grating personality.

forthcoming events. O'Connor explains the difference between her concept of "wise blood" as it applies to both characters:

Haze and Enoch both have wise blood, which is something that enables you to go in the right direction after what you want.... As I see Haze, he . . . most wants man to be shut of God. Enoch, with his wise blood, unerringly lights on what man looks like without God and obligingly brings it for Haze to have a look at.... Enoch's gets him inside an ape suite and Haze's gets him further and further inside himself where one may be supposed to find the answer. (*Collected* 920)

Like Sabbath, Enoch is a nihilist as a result of his nature, which is essentially bestial. On his first appearance in the novel at the street hawker's presentation in Chapter 3, O'Connor begins associating him with canine metaphors; she describes him as looking like "a friendly hound dog with light mange," and he proceeds to follow Hazel around the city like stray (23). Furthermore, on the day that Hazel comes to find him at the City Zoo where he works, Enoch has a portent that he would receive a visitation from a "special person," and if he did not appear soon, "the nerve inside him would grow so big that he would be forced to steal a car or rob a bank or jump out of a dark alley onto a woman" (45). He is entirely the product of his most basic survival instincts and the phallic description of his premonition as a "nerve" that might "grow so big" that he will "jump . . . onto a woman" illuminates that. Furthermore, the violent act of rape implied by this insight into his character parallels Sabbath's implied infanticide—his essential nature is "sinful"; hence, he is a nihilist-by-proxy.

Enoch also serves as a sort of idiotic John the Baptist, bringing the new Jesus to Hazel, at the direction of his “wise blood.” As a “natural” man without God, Enoch’s nihilism manifests itself in uncontrollable urges that he is driven to satisfy, although “it’s always something against the law” (78). After seeing a film that activates his rage, Enoch loses all ability to resist, “feeling that the knowledge he couldn’t avoid was almost on him. His resignation was perfect” (79). At this point, he completely surrenders his volition, becoming totally under the control of his instinct. He begins wandering down the street “as if he were led by... one of those whistles that only dogs can hear,” which directs him to Hazel preaching from his “high rat-colored car.” In his sermon, Hazel calls for a “new Jesus. . . . one that’s man, without blood to waste, . . . one that doesn’t look like any other man so you’ll look at him” (79). Enoch responds like a beast by sputtering “an unintelligible sound” and trying to “bellow”; Hazel has provided him with an explicit interpretation for his mysterious urge—the mummy on display at the museum in the zoo where he is employed is “without blood to waste” and “doesn’t look like any other man.” Enoch reasons that this must be the “new Jesus” Hazel is in search of (79).

After stealing the mummy, Enoch’s experience with the new Jesus yields less than positive results; expecting a great revelation, a transformation that will yield him as “an entirely new man, with an even better personality than he had now” (98), his animal instincts reveal to him the truth that his wise blood is incapable of— “a deep unpleasant knowledge” that “one Jesus was as bad as another” (98-99). He resolves to rid himself of the mummy, and on his way to find Hazel, he sees a poster advertising a personal appearance by an ape named Gongga, promoting a film. Enoch seizes upon this

“opportunity to insult a successful ape” as an act of Providence, and suddenly regains “all his reverence for the new jesus” (100). However, when the ape extends his hand to Enoch, he is overcome with emotion because “it was the first hand that had been extended to [him] since he had come to the city” (102). He blubbers confessionally to the ape, that turns out to be a man in an ape suit who responds to Enoch’s vulnerability by rejecting and humiliating him. Embittered, Enoch rejects his faith in the new jesus altogether, choosing instead to follow his instinct. Consequently, he resorts to violence by attacking the man in the ape suit and stealing it from him. He buries his clothes, which “was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn’t need them anymore” (111), dons the ape suit, and confronts a couple, hoping to finally shake hands with someone, yet only accomplishes scaring them away. Like Asa Hawks, his rejection of “Jesus” ends in violence and “self” destruction. Enoch’s literal “dehumanization”—his pseudo-transformation into an animal—is the culmination of his blood’s wisdom and O’Connor’s parody of the value of human insight without the direction of the Church.

Hazel, as Enoch recognizes, has wise blood as well, but of a different sort. His intuition is reflected in his reaction to both Sabbath and Enoch as revulsion; however, without the benefit of proper interpretation, he cannot see that they both mirror the ultimate ends of his “blasphemy”—the ultimate ramifications of his own acts—but he is clearly repulsed by both of them and responds in kind. Hence, his belief that “blasphemy,” or the direct contradiction of Christian ideology, is the means to truth is thwarted by his own innate integrity. Because he is *not* “filthy right down to the guts,” because he is “clean,” he is instinctively cognizant of and repulsed by the natural

products of his actions; furthermore, because his “wise blood” is attuned to matters of the soul rather than the body, he has no affinity for animal appetites. However, as the blasphemies they represent dovetail together in the mummy/new jesus encounter between Hazel and Sabbath, the combined force of their actions drives him to despair. Hazel’s murder of Solace Layfield (reflexive of Sabbath’s infanticide and Enoch’s attack on the man in the ape suit) represents his final, blind attempt to fully ascribe to nihilism.<sup>7</sup>

Hazel’s murder of Layfield is the most explicit the act of violence in the novel. The scene in question immediately follows the culmination of both Enoch and Sabbath’s ultimate manifestations of the blasphemies/ideologies they represent—Enoch has become an “animal,” and Sabbath, the antithesis of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child—the slattern mother-elect of a long-dead anti-Christ. While Hazel does erupt in violence when Sabbath comes to him with the grotesque mummy, pretending that it is their child, there are two significant events that occur in the context of this episode that indicate Hazel’s reaching his own ultimate manifestation: he has “a complete consumption in his chest; it had seemed to be growing hollow all night and yawning beneath him” (105), which symbolizes that his beliefs are empty, and like Hawks, he is well on the way to self-destruction. He accidentally comes across his mother’s glasses in his duffle bag and puts them on, looks into the mirror and sees “his mother’s face in his” (106) and notes that

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<sup>7</sup> The “mummy/new jesus” is obviously meant to be Nietzsche’s *übermensch*, who by his “will to power,” destroys old ideals and moral codes by rejecting and rebelling against them. Conversely, by that same “will to power,” he overcomes nihilism by re-valuing old ideals or creating new ones. Of course, what Nietzsche means by “nihilism” is the opposite of what O’Connor means—since Nietzsche didn’t believe in God, religion is the principal type of “belief in nothing” the *übermensch* will overcome.

they give “him a look of deflected sharpness, as if he were hiding some dishonest plan that would show in his naked eyes.” His mother’s glasses serve symbolically throughout the novel as a metaphor for his distorted understanding of the Christian faith combined with his reluctance to ultimately abandon it—in other words, his conscience. Hence, he is nervous and disoriented, and it is in this state with the glasses still on when Sabbath enters the room with the mummy and says to him, “Call me mamma now.” While his mother’s glasses represent Hazel’s distorted understanding of *her* ideology, at this point, more importantly, they serve as his conscience, revealing to him a basic insight into the falsehood of the ideology he has come to embrace: In Sabbath’s implicit mockery of the nativity, he can no longer believe that “[t]here’s no such thing as any new jesus. That ain’t anything but a way to say something” (90) because he has seen it with his own eyes. While he has not yet arrived at the place where he is willing to reject nihilism out of hand, this scene does reveal to him the utter hopelessness of his beliefs. Hazel reacts instinctively by snatching the mummy away from her and smashing it against the wall as if it were a deadly insect. Significantly, he then snatches off the glasses and throws them “out the door” (107).

It is immediately following this incident that Hazel murders Solace Layfield, and his rationale for doing so is clearly explained previously in his “doctrinal” sermon in Chapter 10. In the sermon, he sets forth his ideology as centered in relativism—that there is no such thing as one truth, but rather truth is an arbitrary construct; that meaning is only available within oneself. He asks of his audience (himself alone, in reality):



Where in your time and your body has Jesus redeemed you? Show me where because I don't see the place. If there was a place where Jesus had redeemed you that would be the place for you to be, but which of you can find it? . . . Who is that that says it's your conscience? . . . Your conscience is a trick . . . it don't exist though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it's no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you. (93-94)

By stressing that redemption must be tied to a specific place, Hazel is falling victim to his own inability to accept any truth other than that which is verifiable through the five senses—nothing in the metaphysical realm is verifiable; therefore it does not exist. He confronts the argument of the human conscience as such a “place” by denying its existence on the one hand, and advocating that it be “killed” on the other. Significantly, Solace Layfield's first appearance comes immediately after Hazel's preaching about the conscience, and in response to a woman who observes, “Him and you twins?” (94), Hazel responds by repeating, “If you don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll kill you” (95).

Consequently, it is also a reference to Solace Layfield, who is a doppelganger for Hazel in every way—in his appearance, their shared vulnerability to “consumption” (113), and most significantly for Hazel, their complicity as false prophets who do, in fact, believe in Jesus despite their messages.<sup>8</sup> As such, Layfield is the living, breathing, physical

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<sup>8</sup> This reference is also clearly alluded to when Hazel is looking in the mirror while wearing his mother's glasses in the scene with Sabbath and the new Jesus.

manifestation of his conscience—he is, to quote Hazel, “no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you”—and this is why he must kill him.<sup>9</sup>

Hazel’s murder of Layfield is mirrored point-by-point in Enoch’s act of violence in obtaining the ape costume; while Enoch’s act does not end in murder and Hazel’s does, they are both driven by identical motives, and they both arrive at similar ends in that both are the culmination of their individual ideologies, both involve a destruction of the “old self,” but neither are successful at truly arriving at a “new self.” Like Enoch, Hazel seizes upon the opportunity to attack his victim unawares, stalking him—“watching him with the kind of intensity that means something is going to happen no matter what is done to keep it from happening” (113). Hazel, also like Enoch, forces Layfield to remove his suit and hat (which are identical to Hazel’s); while he is doing so, Hazel runs over him with the Essex:

He began grabbing for his feet as if he would take off his shoes too, but before he could get at them, the Essex knocked him flat and ran over him. Haze drove about twenty feet and stopped the car and then began to back it. He backed it over the body and then stopped and got out. The Essex stood half over the other Prophet as if it were pleased to guard what it had finally brought down. The man didn’t look

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<sup>9</sup> The final passage regarding the “face in the mirror/shadow behind you” is an obvious reference by O’Connor to James 1: 19-25: “Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.”

so much like Haze, lying on the ground on his face without his hat or suit on. A lot of blood was coming out of him and forming a puddle around his head. He was motionless all but for one finger that moved up and down in front of his face as if he were marking time with it. Haze poked his toe in his side and he wheezed for a second and then was quiet. “Two things I can’t stand,” Haze said, “—a man that ain’t true and one that mocks what is. You shouldn’t ever have tampered with me if you didn’t want what you got.” (115)

The matter-of-fact cruelty of this scene leaves no room for melodrama or compassion on behalf of O’Connor’s protagonist. While Layfield may well be a parody of Hazel, a symbol of his own self-delusion, the account of his death is highly realistic. Also, the fact that Hazel not only runs over the man, but then deliberately backs the car over him again is not indicative of a crime of passion, but rather pure evil—Hazel has become like Sabbath and Enoch, apparently.

Yet, he has not, and this is a stretch that O’Connor forces her reader to make: Like Emory’s burial of his clothes in favor of the ape costume, Hazel attempts to bury his own conscience in the form of Layfield—the violence against him is a rhetorical self-annihilation. It must be concrete, though, for Hazel to comprehend it as such, otherwise, he would be acting outside the parameters of his innate integrity, and this is what is difficult about the scene—O’Connor insists that the reader take seriously the full implications of Hazel’s ideology, and in every manifestation, it has resulted in either death or dehumanization. By murdering Layfield, Hazel does both, and it is appropriate that this is the culmination of his ideology because it is the union of the ruthless

animalistic determinism of Enoch coupled with the life-as-death of Sabbath—like them, he must commit the ultimate act of dehumanization; he must hit rock bottom; his integrity demands that he follow the course to its absolute ends. If Layfield is his conscience, Hazel is hard pressed to silence it. As he is dying, Layfield makes several attempts at confession, only to be told by Hazel, “You shut up,” but because he is Haze’s conscience, the truth is that he is speaking on behalf of Hazel, which is why he is so adamant about not allowing him to talk (115).

After the murder of Layfield, Hazel loses the Essex because he doesn’t have a driver’s license. Once the police officer pushes it off a cliff, Hazel is no longer able to flee from the ragged figure in the back of his mind on the road of “excess.” The final violences in the book are acts of self-mutilation perpetrated by Hazel against himself that ultimately lead to his death, but more significantly, the violences he experiences ultimately signify his rejection of nihilism in favor of the Christian faith. He begins by carrying out the act that Asa Hawks could not—he blinds himself with water and lime. O’Connor notes that “Haze does not come into his absolute integrity until he blinds himself.... When I say he negates his way back to the cross I only mean that complete nihilism has led him the long way (or maybe it’s really the short way) around to the Redemption again” (O’Connor, *Collected* 920). The significance of this act is that it symbolizes not only Hazel’s recognition of his own problem with insight, but also his full commitment to pursuing the ragged Jesus by eliminating any conflicting or erroneous images that eyesight might bring about—once he capitulates, he pursues “internal” truth with every bit as much vigor as personal destruction. He returns to his practices of self-

mutilation—walking with rocks and broken glass in his shoes and strapping “three strands of barbed wire . . . around his chest” (126). When he dies and his body is delivered to Mrs. Flood, his avaricious landlady whose vigilance about his rent is a constant reminder of the spiritual debt he is “religiously” paying, she tells him, “I’ve been waiting for you. And you needn’t to pay any more rent but have it free here, any way you like” (131). Of course, this is O’Connor indicating that Hazel has finally gained his redemption at last, and he is indeed “debt” free.

### **Interpreting the Argument**

Those who take issue with *Wise Blood* do so because of the death of Solace Layfield. Michael Kowalewski’s calls this act a “sudden outbreak of grotesque nihilism” from which “there is no behavioral norm (in the narrative or in the characters) that provides a respite” (218). It is certainly a difficult passage that begs to be read allegorically, especially considering O’Connor’s assertion that “Haze himself is without sin in the catalogue sense” (O’Connor, *Collected* 920) and her regard for him as “a kind of saint” (941). While it is tempting to do so, to read the section as pure allegory would contradict the realism of the rest of the novel—indeed, the realism of the scene itself. I think O’Connor intends that the murder be taken at face value; yet, how is it possible to reconcile her statements about Hazel’s sinlessness with the fact that he is a murderer?

Certainly, like all of the author’s in this study, O’Connor is attempting to use rhetorical violence in the novel to create the conditions for a transfer of culpability so that the acts she portrays become transitive. She is interested in undermining the

philosophical assumptions that inform the social ideology, interjecting the mystery of the metaphysical into the mix as a solution. Her works do not collectively attempt to bring existentialists to a point of violence that forces them to become Catholics; what she is entirely interested in is apparent in *Wise Blood* and it explains the harshness and grotesqueness inherent to her technique—like Hazel, who is an anthropomorphic representation of existentialism unexamined, she seeks to strike at the philosophy at its most vulnerable point. This is what she is getting at in her invective against “compassion” in works of literature—she sees the ennui inherent to existentialist literature, the pseudo-compassion it elicits, as its greatest weakness, and also as its greatest disguise.

O’Connor’s existentialists are always foisted upon their own integrity; she takes seriously the ramifications of situational ethics and arbitrary absolutes. Whether her characters are victims or victimizers, they are acting in congruence with nihilism, and she uses rhetorical violence as a means of exposing what she sees as the dehumanization that is ultimately at its core. Hence, she intends that the culpability for Hazel’s action lies with the ideology he embraces—nihilism becomes the source of illogic, and the condemnatory force associated with the act of murder he perpetrates is meant to expose it as a faulty, dehumanizing system. The problem comes, however, in how willing the audience is to force-fit the incongruities of the metaphor, and in the case of *Wise Blood*, the incongruities are vast.

It is possible to read this scene as metaphor, which is not the same thing as allegory. By killing Layfield, certainly Hazel is attempting to kill his doppelganger, which is of course representative of his conscience, but this still implies allegory. The

reason it is clearly not allegory, however, is because of the nature of the rhetorical violence itself. All of Hazel's actions throughout the novel are deliberate, calculated culminations of his ideology. Unlike Sabbath and Enoch, who act out of pure instinct and fear, Hazel acts strictly out of forethought and logic. Because he desperately wants to believe there is no God, no law, and no morality, he acts in accordance with those beliefs, and because the thing that he most wants to be rid of is his conscience—the nagging reminder of the debt that must be paid—he deliberately attempts to destroy it by embracing those things that he believes are the transgressions that create such a debt in the first place. If he could ever “learn how to like it” as Sabbath invites him to do, then he believes he will have validated his ideology (95). O'Connor observes about the novel, “in the end the man himself must choose what is sin and what isn't, i.e., conscience is the ultimate sanction” (*Collected* 921). Her definition of “sin” stands outside of cultural mores about good and evil, which is one of the great difficulties of the novel. She takes her definition of “sin” from a passage in the New Testament book of James:

When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1.13-15)

Based on this passage, for an act to be classified as “sin” requires “desire” that originates from the individual, that matures into “temptation,” and then once acted upon, results in sin culminating in “death.” Furthermore, since a central tenet of existentialism is the

concept that all morality is arbitrary, what O'Connor intends is that the reader acknowledge that the moral quality of a given action (regardless of social mores) is not inherent to the action itself, but rather the motive of the person committing the act. Because Hazel acts out of logic rather than temptation, his motives are above reproach, in a strictly Catholic sense as well as an existentialist-sense. Nonetheless, many of his actions are reprehensible for the standpoint of natural law, and it is O'Connor's task to convince the reader that Hazel is essentially "good"; it is his ideology that is erroneous; conversely, if Sabbath actually did commit infanticide, she did so as a result of her own evil desires, and as such, her actions were "sinful."

But "sin" is not the point O'Connor is trying to drive home. Certainly, the argument could be made that Hazel's self-mutilation that ultimately leads to his death constitutes his penance for murdering Layfield, although this is not explicitly implied. What is more probably O'Connor's intent here is that Hazel must ultimately lose him "self" in order to gain redemption, and his self-mortification is so intense it ultimately leads to his death. O'Connor notes, "The penances are certainly acts of assertion even though they are instinctive. Haze is here asserting his wise blood in the ultimate way. When he says he does it to pay, he means to pay his part of the debt of Redemption" (*Collected* 921). Hence, the violence in *Wise Blood* serves to illuminate a paradox—on the one hand, it is an indicator of the externalized dehumanization she sees as inherent to nihilism; on the other, it represents internalized "*de*-humanization" in the sense of rejecting human philosophies in favor of spiritual "truth."



Those critics who find her technique too heavy handed and wonder what the grace of God has to do with murder, rape and other types of violence that appear in her works, O'Connor would contend, are struggling with incongruent ideologies. The mechanism that produces the violence is a faithfulness to the secular ideology she is exposing, while the action of grace is the respite from that atmosphere of human worthlessness—the anomaly—because if humans are worthless, then their deaths are meaningless. Likewise, the detached realism with which she narrates the scene in which Hazel murders Solace Layfield is a product of her insistence upon exposing the utter dehumanization of a “Godless” philosophy, understanding that the logical end of such a philosophy is the devaluing of human life in favor of arbitrary ideas established as truth. Furthermore, she would not identify her attack as being exclusive to existentialism, but rather would define it as a negative condition created necessarily by the negation of God—the philosophy may deny God as a tenet, but in O'Connor's perception, it is the denial of God that creates the philosophy rather than the other way around.

But what if O'Connor is wrong? Certainly, great acts of inhumanity have been carried out in the name of Christ and endorsed by the church. But O'Connor addresses this in every story with characters like Manly Pointer, Asa Hawks, and a host of others—one of her favorite themes is that things are seldom how they appear. For O'Connor, the locus of human actualization is in an encounter with the grace of God, and cultural religion has absolutely nothing to do with that, inherently. Still, her insistence upon this core belief is difficult for many readers; O'Connor's response to this was, “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally” (*Collected* 952).

Consequently, her inflexibility lays bare the rhetorical intent behind her use of rhetorical violence. For O'Connor, it was all about the revelation, and she appropriates the existentialist moment of gestalt for those ends—she repurposes this idea as the intervention of God's grace. In doing so, she sought to evoke a similar epiphany in her audience in order to bring them to the point of persuasion about her ideological aims. The problem, however, is that her philosophy is too reductionist—Hazel Motes is not a “saint,” in spite of what she says about him. Her interpretation of the innocence of his behavior simply elevates rationality above emotions—the sacrificial cultures described by Girard would care very little about Motes's motives in killing Layfield; they simply would have been concerned about the debt created by his blood. Furthermore, the sixth commandment in the Decalogue is “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13).<sup>10</sup> That dictum does not come with a qualifier—it does not stipulate that murder is permissible if the motives of the perpetrator are in some way “pure”: the act itself is the transgression. Furthermore, the passage from James is not intended to be a theological treatise on sin, but rather seeks to explain the human origins that lead to sin as a means of arguing that God is not the source of temptation. O'Connor has elevated this psychological rationale to the status of doctrine to suite her purposes. As such, she has presented us with a God who considers a homicidal sociopath to be a saint.

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<sup>10</sup> Typical English translations of the original Hebrew text render this passage in the more familiar wording, “You shall not kill”; however, the *Torah* makes a distinction between *murdering* and *killing*, and explicitly notes that murder is always a heinous sin, while killing is sometimes necessary, and in these cases just in the eyes of God.

## CHAPTER III

“DISBELIEVABLE THINGS”: CHANGING THE “MASTER NARRATIVE” IN TONI  
MORRISON’S *BELOVED*

The common elements of social equality and the personal struggle for meaning are central to the literature of the oppressed, and there is no finer example than Toni Morrison’s antirealistic novel *Beloved*. Morrison is often characterized as an author in the tradition of Faulkner and Joyce—her prose is frequently characterized as “poetic,” which is at the heart of the association of her style with the aforementioned authors. This quality is centered in the concept of “wit”: economy of words brought about by the skillful use of metaphor. Morrison describes it as “quiet” language, which she sees as necessary to engage the reader’s “participation” (Tate 164). She “attempts to avoid editorializing emotional abstractions . . . hopeless, labored explanation[s] of a simple thing” in her prose, choosing instead to rely on vivid description:

When you think of how it feels to see a man who has abandoned you, to see him after a long period of time, you can go a number of ways to convey it. You could use a lot of rhetoric, but you don’t need to do any of that if you simply see it. You see a person who is a simile, a metaphor, a painting. A painting conveys it better because then *the reader can identify with that feeling, whether or not he or she has ever experienced it. They can feel it because they see the things that person sees*. It’s a question of how to project character, experience from that viewpoint. .

. I never describe characters very much. My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience. It doesn't matter what happens. (164, Morrison's italics)

While she uses the word “rhetoric” in a derogatory manner here (obviously using it in the sense of “inflated language”), the phenomenon she describes is clearly rhetorical in the sense that it is *pro ommaton*—putting something before the eyes of the audience. The “holes and spaces” she refers to are the distances between the metaphor and the message that Aristotle explains as the space where “learning” occurs. The result is that the reader “feel[s] something visceral, see[s] something striking” that yields an “experience” that transcends the work itself, which is more important than “what happens” in the story.

Morrison's *Beloved* is the most violent work in this study, which is appropriate considering its subject matter. A common feature in the literature of American Slavery, violence functions, in the words of Hortense Spillers, to “construct and reconstruct repertoires of usage out of the most painful human/historical experience” (52).

Morrison's artistry lies in her understanding that the skillful use of metaphors is animating—such rhetorical tactics project a kind of hyper-reality onto the characters and events she is describing: they are more “real” than reality because the reader not only

witnesses the action, but is also made privy to the internal thought processes, the rationales—the interpretations—that the author intends to convey.

In *Beloved*, Morrison deals with the issues of ontology informed by the experience of American slavery. A deeply psychological novel, it centers around the story of Sethe, a runaway slave who chooses to commit infanticide rather than return her child to her former master. Morrison's historical frame for the novel is an account of a woman named Margaret Garner that she came across while working as an editor on *The Black Book* at Random House. In January of 1853, Garner, a fugitive slave from Kentucky, was tracked to Ohio and captured by proslavery law enforcement officials in a shantytown on the outskirts of Cincinnati. While the officers were attempting to storm the residence, Garner killed one of her three children and was attempting to kill the other two had the officers not stopped her. Following the incident, she became an icon for abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, and highly pathetic accounts of her story were widely circulated in abolitionist-friendly newspapers, sermons and speeches. In writing her story, Morrison chose to forego intense research on Garner's life in favor of reinventing it for the purpose of exploring the everyday existence of the slaves themselves. *Beloved* centers around the interior lives of the three main characters—Sethe, her daughter, Denver, and Paul D., a fellow slave from the plantation from which Sethe escaped. The central point of struggle for each of the former slaves is centered in questions of ontology cast against a master narrative that relies on the traditional human-animal dichotomy to justify their slave status by classifying them as subhuman. By witnessing these characters' individual struggles to redefine themselves in light of their horrific pasts, Morrison uses rhetorical

violence as a tool to connect her readers to those experiences, and in thereby doing, to confront the essential question of what it means to be human—and inhuman.

Morrison is a deft practitioner of the rhetoric of violence, and is uniquely successful in her ability to create the conditions for the requisite “transfer of culpability” necessary for persuasion to occur. From a rhetorical perspective, she states her purpose in *Beloved* as an exercise in

the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it. I’m trying to explore how a people—in this case one individual or a small group of individuals—absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something [slavery] that is undigestible and unabsorbable, completely. Something that has no precedent in the history of the world, in terms of length of time and the nature and specificity of its devastation. . . . So the central action of *Beloved* posed the perfect dilemma, for me as a writer, from which to explore things I wanted to understand about that period of slavery and about women loving things that are important to them. (Washington 235)

That “perfect dilemma” is typically violent in Morrison’s prose; indeed, it is the visceral, or “gut-wrenching” episode that is so often foundational to her stories because her distinctive use of rhetorical violence is ordinarily focused in some universally reprehensible act. Violence is her catalyst of choice for revelation.

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she takes the rape of a young girl by her father and converts it into an act of compassion. Her description of the primary episode is particularly insightful to the way in which she uses violence metaphorically:

I tell you at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost irrelevant because I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left. (Tate 164)

Hence, by the time the violence actually occurs, Morrison has so packed it as metaphor that the reader can no longer separate it as an isolated event. After all, the incongruence between rape and a “gift” is so disparate, how could the audience possibly make that connection without seeing it, being directed to it, having it personalized, redefined, and reinterpreted for them?

Because the subject matter with which she deals involves, to paraphrase the narrator of *Beloved*'s thoughts, ideas that are difficult to “close in, pin . . . down for anybody who had to ask” (*Beloved* 200)—because she deals with “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (245) that are so essential that they have become commonplace—she frames them in atrocity and thrusts her readers into that crucible in order to re-educate them about those primary human assumptions entrenched and truncated by common life, the natural tendency to seek justice in lieu of empathy, and simple misunderstanding. She uses rhetorical violence to strip away conventional morality by immersing the reader into a world where morality is compromised in every regard. By doing so, she inverts the morality of the act; she makes the irrational rational. In *Beloved*, she levels the moral playing field by establishing her protagonist as a victim of systematized abuse. By the

time the critical infanticide scene appears halfway through the narrative, the reader is ready to accept that the heinous act perpetrated by the protagonist, by comparison to the alternative of turning her child over to her victimizer, was actually a compassionate, loving decision. Morrison's real intent, thus, is not to tell a story about a woman who committed infanticide, but rather to comment on the inhumanity of slavery metaphorically: it is such a heinous institution that the unthinkable—infanticide—is the only motherly/protective option available to her protagonist. The illogical, then, becomes the only logical possibility—but Morrison brings the audience to this logic emotionally via violent representation. Her methodology is not limited to the two overt, climactic execution scenes around which the plot is structured (the infanticide and the burning of Sixo), but rather she weaves episodes of violence in and out of the narrative through internalized monologues and memories that spring up suddenly as the story leaps around in time between Sethe's birth in 1836 and 1873. What she fashions is a claustrophobic, stressful atmosphere that frames the characters' oppressed and chaotic psychological states in the mind of the reader as a basis for revaluing the primary scenes of violence that she ultimately uses to guide the plot and arrive at the fully-matured argument that is at the basis of her story.

### **Conflicting Ideologies in *Beloved***

Morrison's interpretations of her work are every bit as "poetic" as the works themselves. She describes her purpose in *Beloved* as a "kind of literary archeology" ("Site" 111), or what could be regarded as an imaginative reconstruction or recovery of



the dead. She is attempting to “find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it,” to “fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left . . . to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate” (qtd. in Henderson, 81). Hence, Morrison’s stated task is to engage in history-making for the “disremembered and unaccounted for” (*Beloved* 289) victims of American slavery and the Middle Passage: the “Sixty Million and more” to whom she dedicates the book. Her intent is “to *resurrect* stories *buried* and *express* stories *repressed*” (81, Henderson’s italics)—to bring them back to life, existentially speaking, to create history on behalf of people who were unable to create it for themselves. Morrison is indebted to an existentialist understanding of the meaning of human existence with the obvious exception being that she is applying the principle to someone other than herself: she is rescuing them from an existential purgatory of sorts.

Of course, this goal is in keeping with the rhetorical way that she is framing her purpose. Her characters are not and never were real people. While she bases the book on an actual event—an actual person—it is not a retold or re-imagined life of Margaret Garner that she fashions, but rather a complete fiction. At best, Morrison is able to tell a story the way she imagined it might have been to suit the purposes, beliefs, and ideologies that she embraces. Her approach approximates new-historicist critical theory and the perception that Hayden White, in his essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” expresses: that historical narratives should be considered as primarily “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (396). White’s theory is based in the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, particularly his

work with regard to the sociological foundations of the constructing of “histories” as cultural artifacts. History, in the generic sense, is constructed upon what Lévi-Strauss calls “fraudulent outlines” (401), or superimposed chronologies made up of selected episodes that support, first of all, the conventions of “story” and, secondly, the propagation of “myth.” White argues that this mediative model results in the production of historical narrative as “extended metaphor”:

As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences. This historical narrative does not *image* the things it indicates; it *calls to mind* images of the things it indicates, in the same way that a metaphor does. When a given concourse of events is emplotted as a “tragedy,” this simply means that the historian has so described the events as to *remind us* of that form of fiction which we associate with the concept “tragic.” . . . [it] tells us what images to look for in our culturally encoded experience in order to determine how we *should feel* about the thing represented. (“Historical” 402, White’s italics)

White’s point, essentially, is that historical narratives work in much the same way as the other texts in this study: they use vivid examples, carefully chosen for their dramatic impact, in order to create arguments, ultimately ones that shape the consciousness of the culture. Both he and Lévi-Strauss insist that historical events are, in and of themselves, amoral. It is only when they are encoded with the morality of a given culture that they become tragic or triumphant, and that has much to do with the way it is presented in the

narrative. Hence, from the American perspective, and much of that of the free world, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center is considered a moral outrage; however, for many in the Arab world, it is considered, in Abu Ghaith's words, "a good deed" (Abu Ghaith).

Inasmuch as any historical narrative is shaped by the historian's ideology, Morrison's approach is to reflect and amplify the tone of the times rather than to rely on the details of the historical source from which she derived the idea for *Beloved*. In particular, she focuses on the human-animal dichotomy that was highly prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to Darwin and the rise in cultural and anthropological theories of evolution, and she makes metaphoric use of the taxonomies and classification systems that characterize those scientific movements to great effect.<sup>1</sup> In *Beloved*, this takes the form of schoolteacher who practices a sort of cultural anthropologist that he uses to essentially deconstruct the slaves, dividing their traits piecemeal in order to encode the concept and forms of "wildness" and "animality."<sup>2</sup> As Hayden White explains, this notion is a "culturally self-authenticating device" intended to "confirm the value of [the]

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1 Sethe, the protagonist, is especially the focus of bestialization due to her act of infanticide. An article from the San Francisco *Examiner* dated 14 October 1893 relating the events of a murder perpetrated by Patrick Collins illuminates the tenor of the human-animal dichotomy during the period in which *Beloved* is set in its description of the murderer: "The face is not degraded, but brutish....[H]e is not a man who has sunk, but one who was made an animal by nature to start with. The face is broad, the brown eyes are set wide apart, the nose is flattened at the bridge and as broad as a negro's. The jaw is heavy and cruel....You have seen a chained bulldog bare his teeth and growl softly when a kind word was tossed to him. That is Collins" (Norris 260-63). The account reflects the theories of Cesare Lombroso, the originator of criminal anthropology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who held that "criminals were members of a biological subspecies which was at an earlier stage of evolution than normal man" (Pizer 300). By contrast, the abolitionist accounts of Margaret Garner (the historical source for Sethe) are entirely sympathetic, describing her as "a dark mulatto, twenty-three years of age; her countenance is far from being vicious, and her sense, yesterday, appeared partially stultified from the exciting trials she had endured" (May 26-27).

2 Morrison never capitalizes "schoolteacher" in the narrative.

dialectical antithesis between ‘civilization’ . . . and ‘humanity’” (*Tropics* 151). For schoolteacher and the master narrative he represents, defining the negro slaves as animals functions as self-definition by negation, or as Foucault observes, when man “has become a beast, this presence of the animal in man . . . is eliminated: not that the animal is silenced, but man himself is abolished” (*Madness* 76). Hence, the slaves’ “savagery” guarantees schoolteacher’s “civilization”; their bestiality verifies his “humanity.” Via schoolteacher, Morrison inflicts upon the former slaves a sense of history that is characterized by the tension between society and nature, and the questions of ontology and epistemology with which these characters struggle turn upon this opposition.

In her book of essays, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison argues the point of alterity; that the “Africanist presence—decidedly not American, decidedly other” (48) should be among the major topics of “scholarship on the formation of an American character and the production of national literature”—and that it has heretofore been “decidedly” absent:

I want to suggest that . . . autonomy, authority, newness and difference, [and] absolute power . . . not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity. (*Playing* 44)

She argues that what was distinctive about the New World “was, first of all, its claim to freedom, and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic

experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans.” Furthermore, she claims that “it is conceivable that the first would have self-destructed in a variety of ways had it not been for the last” (*Playing* 49). With regard to American literature, Morrison supports her claim by examining the metaphoric use of Africanist characters in the works of Hemingway, Twain, Cather, Melville and Poe as coded symbols: “It was not simply that this slave population had a distinctive color; it was that this color ‘meant’ something” (*Playing* 49). And what it meant in the cradle of American letters was alterity.

Morrison’s point in the discussion—“the alliance between visually rendered ideas and linguistic utterances”—is that the American cultural identity was “formed and informed” (*Playing* 39) by its national literature. The writers who heeded Emerson’s call in “The American Scholar” to create a discrete American voice, one that was clearly distinct from European modes, in Morrison’s observations, found the source of that difference in their own back yards—the Africanist presence became their Other. The symbolic use of Africanist characters, of blackness itself, provided a way to define American freedom, indeed American-ness, by contrast to what it was not. The inherent consequence of this narrative technique, which had as its focus “the construction of a history and a context for whites” was “positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks” (*Playing* 53), or nonexistence, in existentialist terms. Morrison is attempting to counter that narrative technique by creating a new national literature, and in doing, to impact the American cultural identity.

Ontology is central to this task, or the establishment of being. According to Nietzsche's Will to Power, ontological existence depends upon naming, upon remarking in history an intelligible cipher of existence. Morrison's task in *Beloved* is to fashion such an ontological presence. The fingernail pink headstone that Sethe buys for her murdered child with her sex is a metaphor for what Morrison seeks to erect with her story—bought at the price of the wholesale denial of her self, that inscription upon a piece of solid rock accomplished what Sethe could not do for that child in its brief life—it provided her with a name, a semi-permanent remark written upon time to indicate that here was a life, and that truth is worthy of respect and memory. Few would argue that she fails to accomplish that task. Morrison's agenda in *Beloved* is resurrection. Her aim is to re-animate the nameless victims of the Middle Passage and American slavery, and in thereby doing, to create an “eternal reoccurrence of the same” on their behalf. Commenting on the tendency among nineteenth-century slave narratives to passively refer to specific instances of sexual exploitation and other atrocities committed against slaves by their white owners with conventions such as “but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate,” Morrison has described her authorial task as an exploration of “how to rip that veil . . . to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it, [to] fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left, to part the veil that was so frequently drawn,” and, finally, “to implement the stories that [she has] heard” (“Site” 110-13). In keeping with her task to “rehumanize” these lost people, she must necessarily confront those cultural attitudes and beliefs that dehumanized them to begin with. She deftly does so by introducing the reader to Sethe, a protagonist who embodies those associations with

Africanness commonly relied upon in American letters: Otherness, savagery, and bestiality. Yet, in this character, who has perpetrated what is perhaps the most unnatural and inhuman of all acts—infanticide—Morrison leads the reader to ultimately revalue that atrocity as perhaps the single most humanitarian act in the story—and that is the controlling metaphor of the novel. As a metaphor, it forces the reader to reclassify infanticide (in this instance) as the highest sort of humanity.

Morrison engages in what Kress and Hodge call the redefinition of social modalities; her mixture of re-historicizing and the social and philosophical theories previously mentioned manifest themselves in the theme of language as a socially-defining event:

The narrative in *Beloved* highlights the process of reinscription and reinterpretation. It intertwines the mythic, folkloric, and poetic threads of an oral literature with the rhetorical and discursive trajectories of a postmodern literary field. The novel stands amid a cultural context in which play, allusion, quotation serve as privileged aesthetic techniques. It is not enough, however, to claim for *Beloved* the mantle of postmodernism. It and other novels that emerge from multicultural histories serve to foreground the relation between cultural text and sociohistorical context. The “blackness” of black literary texts, historically read to signify a lack in Western discourse, becomes in Morrison’s hands an important thread tying together the complicated realms of politics and aesthetics. The “not” signified by blackness becomes for Morrison a means by which to weave her tale. A process of interpretation and reinterpretation in *Beloved* serves to form an “is”

out of the “nots,” helps untie the tangled threads by which Morrison knits together her novel. (Pérez-Torres 180-181)

The way the “blackness” does so, in Morrison’s hands, is by creating a contrast between the nonexistent narrative of the former slaves and what she calls the “white,” or “master” narrative personified in the novel’s arch-villain, schoolteacher.

The conflicting ideologies behind *Beloved* function on two levels—one is her attack on the cultural ideology that has informed America’s perception of slavery, or rather what she sees as a lack thereof. Necessarily, her theoretical approach focuses on the cultural ideology; she is attempting to appropriate “the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it.” In other words, she hopes with *Beloved* to change the master narrative, the cultural ideology, in order to give Americans of all races a new script for understanding what slavery was, the human toll of it, and to provide a way to address the innate problems it led to that are still of issue today. Her rationale for doing so is drawn from existentialist philosophy in which being is a socially-mediated construct driven by a cultural master narrative, and while her characters struggle with processes inherent to the Will to Power paradigm, ultimately, their ability to be successful in doing so is centered in community, which is an obvious deviation from Nietzschean thought. Due to the primacy of language in this process, Morrison uses metaphors of writing, language, illiteracy and misunderstanding to illustrate their struggle; furthermore, she infuses these with rhetorical violence as a means of driving home the dehumanization that too often occurs against those who do not control the master narrative, and slavery is iconic of that. A parallel theme in the novel is



the rhetoric of place, or specifically what Killingsworth identifies as “triangulation” between place, receiver and meaning (251). Morrison uses the chaotic time and location shifts in the narrative to mirror the homelessness and history-lessness of her characters; place, then, is an ontological symbol that represents the “slave” as a non-being.

Morrison’s novel is certainly rich with themes and associations, but she uses them to a greater end than merely the perpetuation of ideologies: she is most concerned with taking an active part in challenging the socially-prescribed definitions themselves, and the quality that makes this novel so universal in application lies in her indictment of the way we use social ideologies to dehumanize others. At the heart of her characters’ traumatic struggles is the battle of selfhood waged against a master narrative that would define them as more animal than human. This concept of the human-animal dichotomy is so ancient, so ensconced in our consciousness, we tend to take it for granted, often using the excuse of bestiality to explain the violence perpetrated by humans against each other. By the conclusion of *Beloved*, Morrison totally annihilates this assumption by revealing it as utterly illogical—all that is left is the reality that the dichotomy is merely human, either good or evil.

### **Causal Connection**

Morrison’s use of rhetorical violence is always connected to the human-animal dichotomy that her characters are struggling against. They are burned to death, hanged, beaten, caged, forced to wear restraints similar to those used on animals—they also experience and perpetrate infanticide. Additionally, Morrison infuses her prose with

small violences that color the tense atmosphere and reinforce the status of non-person that her characters inhabit. Even the natural violence of birth is related in animalistic terms. It is because these characters are defined as livestock by the master narrative that these abuses take place; consequently, all of the main characters struggle against the definitions of the master narrative as they seek to attain the status of personhood that has been denied them. Furthermore, each of them struggle against the repression of the violence and dehumanization they have endured that causes them to never truly live. The “white” or “master” narrative personified in the character of schoolteacher, represents “the narrative of history, science, and the Humanities and their respective theories” (Hostettler 23), essentially those studies that encoded the bestializing of slaves and facilitated the culture of slavery. Hence, the narrative form Morrison arrived at is heavily imbued with ontological issues, and the locus of conflict lies in the human-versus-animal status applied to the main characters by the master narrative.

Schoolteacher, the brother of Mrs. Garner, becomes the overseer of Sweet Home plantation after the death of Mr. Garner. Under Garner, Sweet Home was idyllic of the Old South myth of slavery, only better—he afforded his slaves some respect and dignity and some agency in that; they were at least called “men.” Paul D. observes, “In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to. He thought what they said had merit, and what they felt was serious. Deferring to his slaves’ opinions did not deprive him of authority or power” (131). Thus, Garner regarded his slaves to be men rather than animals, and that manifested itself in his treatment of them: Sethe is allowed to pick a husband rather than

being treated as breeding stock, and Halle is allowed to “buy” the freedom of his mother, Baby Suggs. While Garner treated his slaves like human beings, Paul D. goes on to assert that “it was schoolteacher who taught them otherwise. A truth that waved like a scarecrow in rye: they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home.” When schoolteacher comes to manage the plantation after Garner’s death, he becomes the agent through which agency is stolen from Sethe and the other slaves. While schoolteacher’s initial activities are not *physically* violent, *they create the rationale for the violence that follows*.

Schoolteacher uses the Sweet Home slaves as a control group to teach his nephews his scientific theories, which seem to be in keeping with 19<sup>th</sup> century assumptions that Africans were a species of human less evolved than white Europeans. As such, schoolteacher’s theories are *psychologically* violent in that they eviscerate the humanness from the slaves. Numerous critics have noted the Nazi-esque quality of schoolteacher’s methodology, which culminates in the torture and murder of some and the destruction of the psyches of all the characters. Morrison’s first mention of schoolteacher is to inform the reader that “what he did broke [the] Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight” (10)—these loaded generalizations use violent verbs (“broke” and “punched”) to communicate the vast psychological damage more so than the actual violences—which were remarkably heinous in themselves—for which he was responsible. Ultimately, it is from schoolteacher’s ideological discourse—his *narrative*—that Sethe seeks to protect her children through death.

Schoolteacher's power is absolute because he is the controller of the master narrative. He is "[f]aceless, nameless," because he represents "the speaking subject of slavery's discourse" (Pérez-Torres 186); hence, he serves as the icon of a greater evil than he alone is responsible for—he is the voice for the master narrative at large. Schoolteacher's lack of identity also reflects the namelessness of the slaves themselves. Three of the five Sweet Home slaves were named Paul, with only a middle initial signifying difference. Sethe's name is African, and she doesn't know its meaning. Baby Suggs takes her name from the one "husband" she had briefly, whose pet name for her was "Baby." Naming is significant to being; it validates existence, uniqueness, and individuality—it is a birthright. It locates the person in a family, a history, a place and a future—it is a symbol of ownership, but also of heritage. For slaves, it was simply a mark of ownership and definition. But schoolteacher's unnamed condition is different: for the Sweet Home slaves, the names are meaninglessly amorphous, but schoolteacher's "name" is clearly definitional. He is the possessor, arbiter and distributor of knowledge, but not just any knowledge—institutional knowledge. Furthermore, he is the disciplinarian, enforcer and encoder of that knowledge, the controller of the medium through which it is delivered.<sup>3</sup> Because he is the controller of the medium, or language, schoolteacher is the "definer"; he beats Sixo "to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (199). It is this total power to define that enables him to

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3 In schoolteacher, we see the deconstruction of Althusser's tired old Marxist dichotomy between repressive state apparatus (coercive) and ideological state apparatus (persuasive: church, school, etc.). He is both.

arbitrarily classify the Sweet Home slaves as non-humans, animals, and deprive them of their personhood.

Morrison carefully connects the implicit violence of the narrative to the explicit violence of the narrative actualized. Consequently, what begins as discourse—or simply observations and assumptions written in a notebook—becomes reality. Causality is latent in the discourse; because it is thought, spoken, and written, it becomes the narrative reality that must be acted upon. Foucault notes that the function of public torture and execution was so that guilty person's "sentence [was] legible to all. ... the condemned man published his crime and the justice that had been meted out to him by bearing them physically on his body" (*Discipline* 43); however, it is the *sentence* that renders the body "the stone and paper, the tablet and the currency on which the ... writing is able to mark its figures, its phonetism, and its alphabet" (Deleuze and Guattari 212). The legal actions of the judiciary evaluates the conditions of a given crime and assigns culpability to an individual. As a result, a sentence is designated—a verbal description of punishment that will be enacted upon the body of the criminal that also encodes the punishment with meaning which supports the power structure. While the rigors of public law make this connection between language and action explicit, it is no less present in the acts of violence perpetrated by the criminals as well, for certainly inasmuch as thought produces deliberate action, they are acting out of their own language-bound rationales. Hence, in the case of violence, it can be said that the point of conflict is essentially rhetorical, or one ideology maintained as the publicly endorsed narrative, and the other the creation of an individual or group that is not endorsed. In either case, the resulting violence is a

fulfillment of what has originally occurred in language. This phenomenon is apparent in the violation of Sethe by the nephews, which is somewhere between rape and milking a cow, and as such is the fulfillment of the master narrative's human-animal dichotomy. Schoolteacher's power as definer renders Sethe's basic humanity liminal; now her definitional status is no longer centered in slave-versus-free, but rather person-versus-nonperson. His power renders what is *a priori* about her arbitrary. His discourse *becomes* Sethe's identity, and she *becomes* his discourse, quite literally, when she is whipped—her back is divided and “inscribed” with his authority and definition of her. It becomes “written” on her body.

When Halle witnesses his wife's dehumanization, and is powerless to do anything about it, he goes mad (“It broke him”), sitting stupefied by the churn “with butter all over his face” (78); he does not scream, protest, or fight—schoolteacher, the definer and controller of language renders him speechless, and in thereby doing, actionless as well. By retreating into madness, Halle succumbs to non-rationality, or the realm in which language and reality are disconnected. Halle's madness can be considered in spatial terms—to go mad is a way of assuming an alternate reality—one “goes” insane, which implies leaving some place defined as “sane.”<sup>4</sup> Because of his status as slave, Halle is outside of the master narrative. He has no status-as-person under that narrative, and therefore, the Burkean concepts of “transformation and substitution” are unavailable to

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4 Foucault defines madness as the point in which the individual “crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic” (*Madness* 58). Like Sethe, who will later attempt to place her children “outside” the master narrative by killing them, Halle does so through insanity.

him because there is no way he can achieve identification with schoolteacher, the controller of the narrative. Thus, he has no “place,” no “grounds,” to appeal for justice on behalf of his wife. Killingsworth, discussing rhetorical appeals to place, notes that

The medium of communication in contexts that involve social and cultural diversity is sometimes modeled as a boundary or an obstacle. According to this view, linguistic and cultural differences are problems that must be overcome.

Rhetorical appeals somehow lift the communicants over the boundary or obstacle and bring them together. (256)

Language is the primary human negotiating tool, but since Halle does not have human status, it becomes an insurmountable “boundary or obstacle.”

Ostensibly, Halle’s dilemma is the result of the pervasiveness of the master narrative—”place,” in *Beloved* is synonymous with “white” space. Sweet Home is the archetype for all other places in the novel, functioning as both Eden and Hell:

Garner has been very much god in that paradise of Sweet Home. . . he appropriates to himself the power of naming as the tangible symbol of his godhead; he goes further . . . he names species. He can call slaves men in the world that he has created, in his plantation paradise . . . . Before the satanic schoolteacher arrives, Garner has clearly given unprecedented license to the slaves and has won the enmity of his neighbors. (Harris 149)

The primary characters harken back to Sweet Home under Garner as an idyllic place.

While they were in reality nonetheless slaves, their existence was a sheltered one—one

that emulated the protected status of childhood—they are “named” men, but without the responsibility or volition of men.

Transversely, under schoolteacher, Sweet Home does not become Eden after the fall, but rather Hell. The ambiguity of that transformation is expressed by Sethe as she remembers, “It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves” (6). Under Garner, Sweet Home represents a dispensation, or an oasis—a physical place in time where slaves enjoyed some semblance of personhood, or as Paul D. comes to realize, “they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home” (131). In *Beloved*, place and narrative, past and present, are connected and coexistent—what Sethe calls “rememory.” Hence, Sethe warns Denver that, although she did not experience Sweet Home’s atrocities because they were in the past, they still exist:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what. (38-39)



Sethe's warning is filled with ontological portent, and of course, it foreshadows the appearance of the ghost, *Beloved*, or the past that will not die. Rememory is the living slave narrative; not an active but a passive narrative, an internalized rather than an externalized violence. Rhetorically, Morrison is pressing upon the reader the idea that such violences are never a thing of the past. The "thought pictures" The reaction to an action; an acknowledgement to the efficacy of force. It is the scream of pain answering the blow from the master narrative—truth so terrible it supersedes the ontologic power of history, but potent and ultimately undeniable. And because that is true, it must exist somewhere, in some place.

Sethe's perception is validated in the occurrences that immediately follow her arrival at 124 Blue Stone Road, her mother-in-law's home, wherein the entire cycle of Eden-to-Hell is replayed. Sweet Home under Garner ironically represents the former slaves' potential, or at least hoped-for, status in the Free States. The Sweet Home myth is passed on to Baby Suggs when Garner delivers her to Ohio. She constructs a narrative of her own, fashioning a natural religion for which she becomes the evangelist, "Baby Suggs, holy."<sup>5</sup> Suggs establishes and thrives in her own alterity, revaluing "otherness" as a means to self-actualization for other freed slaves to follow. The power behind Suggs's message lies in her life force represented by her heart, which she first felt beat on the day she was released by Mr. Garner. It becomes symbolic to her of her freedom and her

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5 The Hebrew adjective for "holy" (*qadosh*) literally means "marked off" or "separate," and is derived from a common verb meaning "to cut off" or "to separate." While this marks Suggs as a type of priest, more importantly, it metaphorically represents her religion of embracing alterity. (See pg. 50 for an extended discussion of the term "holy").

ownership of herself. Morrison describes her preaching as Suggs allowing “her great heart to beat in their presence” (100); hence her message of hope is one of self-ownership, self-definition, and self-reliance. Furthermore, Suggs’s “church” is a clearing in the woods representing her rejection of established churches as places encoded with the master narrative.

124, like Sweet Home, is revalued from an Edenic place to a Hell after the arrival of schoolteacher and the bounty hunters, which culminates in Sethe committing infanticide. It is permuted from a house of life to a house of death, haunted by rememory because it has been demarcated and defined by the master narrative as “white space.” After that incident, the house on Blue Stone Road ceases to be a waystation for the community, or an extension of Baby Suggs’s great heart, and becomes nothing more than a constant reminder of the omnipresence of the master narrative. In fact, “white” is the primary descriptor Morrison uses for the house—it is “gray-and-white” (3), the wallpaper and curtains are white, and the staircase is described as “white,” “luminous white” or “lightning white” in fully half of the fifty-five times the word appears in the book. Obviously, this is indicative of the ownership Ashland refers to—124 is symbolic of the other kind of haunting in the story: everything that can be owned *is* owned by whites and defined by the ubiquitous master narrative. It is inescapable; to be alive is to function, breath, swallow the narrative. When Sethe suggests to Baby Suggs that they move to escape the ghost’s torments, Suggs replies, “What’d be the point? Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (5). Ultimately, Baby Suggs dies “pondering color” (4) in a house suffused with whiteness.

Obviously, the pervasiveness of the narrative, in addition to licensing the dehumanizing violence perpetrated against the slaves, is so infused into “place” that “emancipation” and “escape” become meaningless concepts because blacks are excluded from the narrative; whatever meaning those terms have in the controlling medium are untranslatable into the narrative of the former slaves. In keeping with Killingsworth’s observation that rhetorical appeals function to “somehow lift the communicants over the boundary or obstacle and bring them together,” the exclusion of the slaves from the narrative makes them insurmountable and results in a psychotic break both for Halle and Sethe (256). Trying to recount the story of the infanticide to Paul D., Sethe “circles” around it because it is difficult to “pin it down for anyone who had to ask” (187), essentially because her experience was outside of rationality. She recalls,

Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil,—out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (187)

The hummingbirds suggest the intuitive blur created by the threat of danger—the point at which cognition is subjugated to reaction. Sethe thinks only one word in the dialect of the master narrative, and that is to deny it—“No. No. Nono. Nonono.” The externalized

violence is answered with internalized violence, and this is done in a rhetorical space—because their existence is denied in white space, they change their *position, grounding* themselves, or in Sethe’s case, her child, in *spaces* outside of the narrative. For Halle, this is the internal. For Sethe, it is the supernatural. Her intention is to drag her children “through the veil,—out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.” It must be recognized that her doing so is a retort—a rhetoric that flatly denies what is defined as *a priori* by the master narrative. By doing what she does, she intends to utterly remove her children from the argument because the master argument validates itself through action.

In this milieu, Sethe’s murder of her baby becomes a hyperloaded metaphor inculcated with enormous rhetorical force. Her “no,” activated, becomes the rhetorical equivalent of a supernova, which first implodes upon itself, then, building power, explodes, resulting in a black hole—everyone in the community feels the percussive impact, but they’re all left with a confusing void of meaning that they must sort out for themselves. Trudier Harris discusses the moral dilemma that Sethe’s act forces on the community as well as the reader:

[Morrison] politely assault[s] our acceptance of certain cultural assumptions.

Initially, she challenges beliefs about morality, about the absoluteness of good and evil; she has done so in all of her books, but the challenge is more intense in *Beloved*. Killing a child is certainly antithetical to the basic roots of our society, but Morrison forces us to ask again and again what we might have done under the circumstances. And she succeeds in making Sethe so simply human and

American (the God-given right to motherhood, love of one's children, desire of a better life for them, love of freedom, nonconformity) that we cannot easily condemn her act even when we clearly do not condone it. The moral issues, therefore, lock us into participation in the novel. We are constantly encouraged to ask questions: "Is Sethe right to kill Beloved? What would I have done under the same circumstances? Are some conditions of life worse than death? (144)

The essential rhetorical nature of Sethe's act is grounded in antithesis—she pushes the master narrative to its logical ends by acting within the parameters of its own field of definitions. Consequently, Sethe creates a counter-narrative that restores her humanity and redefines the requirements of motherly love. She claims her right to personhood through a deeper narrative which supersedes the master narrative. Her act subjugates and denies the claims to exclusive truth-by-definition espoused by the keepers of the master narrative; hence, its so called "truths" are not immutable after all. She accomplishes this by navigating beyond personhood to the more essential subcategory of "mother-ness," defined as the quality of one who, above all else, protects her children, but then, paradoxically, she quintessentially violates that quality. By killing her child to protect her from the master narrative, she performs an irrational act that magnifies the irrationality of the narrative itself.

From a purely rhetorical perspective, Morrison is banking on the audience buying into what Harris calls the "God-given right to motherhood, love of one's children, desire of a better life for them" ideals that frame our cultural understanding of "mother-ness" not only to redeem her protagonist, but also to drive her essential rhetorical point. It is the

locus of her appeal, and there may exist no finer example of the efficacy of the metaphorical application of rhetorical violence. *Beloved* “works” because, when Morrison flips the infanticide scene’s *enargeiac* “value,” the audience is willing to follow her. The universally reprehensible act is cut from its ethical moorings and becomes a free radical; yet, it retains all of its original intensity—only now, Morrison is at liberty to redefine it (which, ironically, mirrors the role of schoolteacher). Infanticide remains a great evil, but the culpability for the act is shifted to schoolteacher/the master narrative-as-victimizer; nonetheless, that transfer can only occur inasmuch as the audience is willing to force-fit the incongruities of the metaphor. The reader must resolve that Sethe’s act, within the given context, *was* consistent with mother-ness—that she *did* love her children, that she *was* protecting them in the best way she knew how, and that was informed by her hope for a better life for them. Morrison has to lead her audience to the point that (to reframe her description of the critical scene from *The Bluest Eye*), the infanticide, “which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined,” by the time it appears in the narrative, “it’s almost irrelevant” because we’ve witnessed Sethe’s humanity, her victimization, her love for her daughter, Denver, and her “powerlessness” in the face of the master narrative: by that time, Sethe’s motherly act of love, the murder, is “all the gift [she] has left.”

It is this sequencing that Morrison relies on to create her desired effect. The infanticide scene is framed on either side by two other graphically violent events. The first one, the account of Sethe’s sexual encounter with the grave stone engraver, establishes Sethe as a victim, while the second one, the torturous execution of Sixo,

provides an answer to the semiotic and ontological problems that the act of infanticide creates. In Chapter 1, Denver's comment about the baby ghost throwing a "powerful spell" (5) results in Sethe having a flashback to an event in which she trades sexual intercourse (or more concisely, consensual rape) with a tombstone engraver in order to acquire a headstone for her child's grave. Sethe ruminates,

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust.

Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the

grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil. (5)

It is pointedly not the infanticide but the sexual victimization of Sethe that is the focus of this account. Morrison thrusts the reader into this uncomfortable, voyeuristic vision of rape and abuse occurring for all the world to see, a parody of the life-creating act done in a graveyard, Sethe's womb now a symbol for death, disclosing for the first time even as she victimizes her, that her protagonist murdered her baby by cutting its throat. This revelation forces readers into the awkward choice of either aligning their sympathies with Sethe, or emulating/perpetuating the tombstone engraver's son's reaction of "anger" and "appetite"—a psychological manipulation that Morrison creates with tremendous subtlety and rhetorical skill. She places an ideal listener at the scene in the form of the son, but the nature of the account makes him a voyeur; hence the reader becomes a voyeur as well. The result is that we are disgusted by the scene even as we are implicated in it, which functions to assure that we will gloss over any predetermined assumptions about the morality of Sethe's act—we will withhold judgment because, at this point, we can *only* choose to sympathize with Sethe as a victim of sexual abuse. Morrison has *affectively* predetermined that any predisposed condemnation one might readily assume toward her as a perpetrator of infanticide equates with the "anger/appetite" of the son because she has essentially joined the two emotions together in the account so that one cannot exist without the other: to feel the anger requires also feeling the shame of the appetite, whether the reader in some unimaginable way finds the scene titillating or not. While there is not enough information about the actual murder of the child at this point to fully



bring about a revaluation of that act, Morrison has begun, adroitly, the process of building sympathy for Sethe in the mind of the reader nonetheless by establishing her first as a victim, and then, delicately, as a victimizer. While she is just beginning the process of truly revaluing the act of infanticide, Morrison is guiding the reader, whom she has tactilely placed into the scene with Sethe, toward the perception that abuse, victimization and death were the only things the slave mother could guarantee for her children.

The actual scene in which the infanticide is recounted makes use of a similar rhetorical technique. Morrison shifts the point of view twice in the account—the first section is told from the third person limited perspective of a narrator in support of the master narrative, and the second section is told from that of Morrison's black narrative. The master narrative section relates the events as schoolteacher and the other slave catchers arrive on the scene, and the language reflects this (see page 156 ff). It also features two internal dialogues—one from schoolteacher, the other from the nephew who “had nursed her while his brother held her down” (158). The animalization of the slaves whom the slave catchers stalk now takes a different tenor; while in earlier cases under schoolteacher, they had the status of domesticated creatures, as fugitives, they become game—something to be stalked, something potentially dangerous, and, consequently, something to be engaged with caution, not because of the risk to the hunter, but rather the potential jeopardy to themselves. The narrator recounts the hunt, how three of the trackers dismount and fan out in case the fugitive runs, while explaining the various ways in which, alternatively, some would hide themselves:

Even then care was taken, because the quietest ones, the ones you pulled from a press, a hayloft, or, that once, from a chimney, would go along nicely for two or three seconds. Caught red-handed, so to speak, they would seem to recognize the futility of outsmarting a white-man and the hopelessness of outrunning a rifle.

Smile even, like a child caught dead with his hand in the jelly jar, and when you reached for the rope to tie him, well, even then you couldn't tell. (156)

The narrator defines the fugitives as being deficient in intelligence; it is a given that they are “outsmarted” by the superior intelligence of a “white-man,” and even if they are not capable of perceiving the overbearing power of a superior intellect, they will respect that the white-man is also the possessors of the technology of violent suppression—the rifle. They are perpetually children in relation to the parent, and their disobedience in escaping is equated with stealing from the jelly jar. However, they are also possessed of a latent animalistic wildness that may emerge without warning:

The very nigger with his head hanging and a little jelly-jar smile on his face could all of a sudden roar, like a bull or some such, and commence to do unbelievable things. Grab the rifle at its mouth; throw himself at the one holding it—anything. So you had to keep back a pace, leave the trying to another. Otherwise you ended up killing what you were paid to bring back alive. Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin.

The transformation from child to “bull” results in “disbelievable” things. The word Morrison uses here is an amalgamation of disobedience and unbelief—unbelievable

because it is irrational to the narrator, obviously, but also because it is a deliberate rejection of the assumptions of white supremacy and power in the very face of it. Hence, the negro-animal must be captured carefully because, like a horse, mule or other beast of burden, he is only useful alive—he cannot be used for meat, his skin cannot be sold; in this way, he is *less* than domesticated livestock or game. Suppression is the goal of the hunt, not the kill because killing the game renders it valueless.

As they approach the shed where Sethe has gone to murder her children, the slave catchers observe Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs in the yard, both of them in shock, which the narrator classifies as “crazy” in an offhanded, derogatory fashion. What follows is the death scene, which Morrison describes from the perspective of the slave catchers:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere—in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at—the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother’s swing. (157)

Immediately following this paragraph, the narrative is directed to the internal dialog of schoolteacher. The scene is connected viscerally to the incident with the tombstone salesman; furthermore, the reader has already been thoroughly inculcated with the knowledge that schoolteacher has raped her emotionally to a far greater degree. Parallel to the previous episode, the narrative functions to create an ideal observer but does so

ironically by making that observer the nemesis to the protagonist. Via the eyes of schoolteacher, Morrison places sympathetic distance between her protagonist and the act she perpetrates—it places the blame on the beholder just as surely as the suggestion and innuendo about him prepares the reader to accept that assignment of culpability.

Schoolteacher's bland internal commentary follows, devoid of compassion, or personal culpability wherein he regards the scene in terms of livestock mismanagement on the part of his nephew: "you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success" (158). By only recounting Sethe's actions through the eyes of characters whom the reader has been previously conditioned to despise, by loading this account with dehumanizing, bigoted jargon, and by making the focus of his emotional reaction to the scene about the loss of property, Morrison deflects the potentially morally damaging visceral impact of the rhetorical violence away from her protagonist and toward her villain. She does so by tempering schoolteacher's heavy-handed account with a milder one delivered by his counterpart, the nephew, who reasons in terms of his own experience with beatings: "once it hurt so bad and made him so mad he'd smashed the well bucket. Another time he took it out on Samson [a dog]—a few tossed rocks was all. But no beating ever made him... I mean, no way could he have... What she go and do that for?" (158). Adroitly placing the reader's own reservations ("I could never do that") about Sethe's act in the mouth of one so closely allied with schoolteacher, Morrison effectually forces the reader to make a choice about the violence she has just exposed them to—either reserve judgment on what Sethe has done or align oneself with schoolteacher and all he represents. The nephew's observation also lends perspective to the abuses experienced by

Sethe and, by association, lends perspective to the reader. Just like the nephew, we cannot know what the abuse Sethe experienced must have been like. The nephew's "beatings" were not of the same intensity; they were not life threatening; they did not result in the loss of his identity. The simple acts of retaliation—smashing the well bucket and throwing rocks at the dog—actually serve to minimize them. The nephew's attempt at identification with Sethe is ironic at best.

The second half of the chapter is delivered by a "reliable" narrator speaking from the third person limited perspective of Baby Suggs. Control of the situation shifts from the Sheriff to Baby Suggs, and along with it, the narrative voice. The Sheriff's reacts to the scene like schoolteacher and the nephews: he wants to leave, too, but "[n]ot because he was afraid. Not at all. He was just cold. And he didn't want to touch anything" (159). He is shocked and disgusted by the scene. As the representative of the Law, or that agency in society that oversees compliance to the narrative, he is completely unable to effectively restore order—the scene has essentially silenced the controlling "voice." It is the moan of one of the boys laying on the floor, who the Sheriff thinks is dead, that causes him to finally speak to Sethe:

"I'll have to take you in. No trouble now. You've done enough to last you. Come on now."

She did not move.

"You come quiet, hear, and I won't have to tie you up."

She stayed still and he had made up his mind to go near her and some kind of way bind her wet red hands. (159)

Sethe is placed under arrest, an act which, at this point, amplifies the fact that what she has done has silenced the master narrative's ability to control. She is no longer a danger to herself or others because her act ended the threat represented by schoolteacher.

In contrast, Baby Suggs methodically begins restoring order to the chaotic scene. By immediately describing the aftermath of this gory episode through the eyes of the most sympathetic character in the novel, Morrison guides the reader to revalue what has happened as a kind of sacrifice. Stamp Paid and Suggs unsuccessfully attempt to get Sethe to trade the dead child for Denver. Suggs turns her attention to the two boys, "bathing their heads," symbolizing anointing, and repeatedly whispering, "Beg your pardon, I beg your pardon," which is a double entendre that reads like a colloquialism directed tenderly toward the two children as well as the prayer of a suppliant begging forgiveness from a wrathful deity. Her supplication comes from the belief that she has committed the sin of excess—"Baby Suggs, holy, didn't approve of extra. 'Everything depends on knowing how much,' she said, and 'Good is knowing when to stop'" (92). Suggs is able to relieve Sethe of the corpse by telling her, "It's time to nurse your youngest," exchanging the living child for the dead one. However, when Sethe then "[aims] a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth," a struggle ensues which ends in Suggs slipping in the blood of the sacrifice and the baby taking "her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister"—an act which further solidifies Sethe's mental incapacity at this point, yet demonstrates the capacity of her will nonetheless.

It also changes the quality of the bloodletting from murder to sacrifice in a very specific way: it is not an act of atonement intended to appease the deity of schoolteacher

and the dominant culture he represents as Suggs's whispered prayer of repentance suggests. Rather than "food" for the gods, Morrison revalues the sacrifice as a too-precious payment or investment toward genuine freedom, the fulfillment of which will come through Denver who "ate" the blood, the essence of her sister (and, significantly, not the two boys who had the blood washed from them). Denver eating the blood of her sister binds the two characters symbolically—one representing the past, and the other the future, but also, the passing on of life from death, and the transfer of responsibility to Denver to tell the story, to change the narrative; as such, the latent power of the truth that is ultimately manifested as the ghost, Beloved, is at this point literally, violently, "placed in the mouth" of Denver, and she must ultimately choose to dissipate that power by retelling this truth to others, or hold its destructive force within herself.

The ritualization of the scene takes on further significance, however, because it signals a change in the rhetorical strategy for the narrative. Control of the scene shifts again when Sethe refuses to let Suggs take the baby from her, which signifies a transfer of power between the two characters. Trudier Harris observes that Suggs, who abdicates her role as priestess from this point forward, "descends from the legendary status that has defined her to become just another victim of slavery, a victimization all the more tragic because she clearly had the power not to adhere to such a fate" (148). But Harris is missing the point. By taking her blood and mother's milk together, the baby, Denver, is partaking in a blending of the Eucharist and the sacred status of motherhood, which Morrison must necessarily elevate at this juncture as *a priori* and outside of the master

narrative. As such, the episode gives rise to a new covenant that supersedes the one signified by Baby Suggs.

Under the old covenant, Suggs preached a passive approach to the master narrative. Her message is essentially, “love yourself because no one else does.” As such, it is not really a new narrative at all, but merely a reflexive response to the master narrative—a silent, inert denial that is inherently non-confrontational. Suggs’s passivity is born of the fact that she is never the direct recipient of schoolteacher’s narrative. She left Sweet Home while Garner was still alive; therefore, she has no valid context from which to argue. While this observation is not meant to minimize the fact that she suffered greatly as a slave, Morrison’s intentional destruction of Suggs’s faith after the infanticide must obviously mean—contrary to Harris’s claim—that it represents an invalid response to the master narrative and one that must be rejected. The “godhead” behind Suggs’s religion is clearly meant to be Garner, who represents the mythic Old South of Uncle Remus filled with happy slaves and benevolent masters. This association makes her religion weak and inadequate, ultimately, because its locus is in her “great heart,” which represents her freedom. Hence, the binaries at stake in Suggs’s religion are free-versus-nonfree, or slavery-as-nonfreedom, but the problem with this dichotomy is that freedom is such an abstract concept that it provides too great a variable for genuinely comprehending the atrocity that slavery was; more significantly, it fails to acknowledge that the real binary in question is human-versus-animal, or person-versus-nonperson. For Baby Suggs, the bloodletting in her shed is impossible to reconcile with her theology, and consequently, “God puzzled her and she was too ashamed of Him to say so” (185).



However, when Sethe said “No,” a new narrative emerged—one that patently denied the master narrative because it was externalized, and as such, was required to be realized in action. Sethe emerges as promulgator of a new narrative because she alone is the keeper of the valid rhetoric—it is still an oral “religion” at this point—and essentially replaces Suggs. Sethe has earned the right to do this because of her sacrifice, but also because she has been the direct object of the master narrative in all its fury. Schoolteacher is the impetus behind Sethe’s religion by antithesis. Contrary to Suggs’s ideology, which advocates a means of living within the confines of the master narrative, Sethe’s action reveals the potential for changing the master narrative instead. Denver will be the valid way because she will learn to read and write, and it is assumed that she will be the one who converts the oral tradition embodied by Sethe and Beloved into a written tradition, and in so doing, will enter it into historical discourse where it can no longer die, and upon which the master narrative is dependent.

The second violent act that frames the infanticide scene from behind is the execution of Sixo by schoolteacher. It is told by a narrator from the third person limited perspective via Paul D. This event occurs at the same time that Sethe escapes; while she is successful, the Sweet Home men are not. In the ensuing scene, Paul D. has already been captured and is watching as Sixo resists capture. Sixo *sings* as he “cracks the ribs of one” of his pursuers, which at first seems to mimic the slave catcher’s observations about the “disbelievable” actions of a “crazy nigger” upon being captured. However, Morrison would not be Morrison if she did not deftly revalue that flippant, derogatory assumption. Sixo, while attacking his pursuer, is singing—not screaming, or snorting, or any other sort

of guttural, ecstatic utterance; in fact, singing requires a higher degree of cognitive awareness than coherent speech alone. As such, it is an indicator of his presence of mind: his actions are hyper-rational, deliberate and purposeful. Sixo knows that his actions will culminate in his death, but he is trying to channel the methodology. He wants to be made an example of, to be ritually put to death, because he knows that ritual execution requires elaborate ceremony, which requires preparation—what Sixo really wants most is to buy time. Morrison places the reader in the present tense of the scene. The reader “watches” the cruelty unfold as Sixo slowly burns to death in the “stubborn fire,” made of green wood—hot enough to torture, but not enough to actually facilitate his death:

Finally one of them hits Sixo in the head with his rifle, and when he comes to, a hickory fire is in front of him and he is tied at the waist to a tree. Schoolteacher has changed his mind: “This one will never be suitable.” The song must have convinced him. The fire keeps failing and the whitemen are put out with themselves at not being prepared for this emergency. They came to capture, not kill. What they can manage is only enough for cooking hominy. Dry faggots are scarce and the grass is slick with dew. By the light of the hominy fire Sixo straightens. He is through with his song. He laughs. A rippling sound like Sethe’s sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater. His feet are cooking; the cloth of his trousers smokes. He laughs. Something is funny. Paul D guesses what it is when Sixo, interrupts his laughter to call out, “Seven-O! Seven-O!” Smoky, stubborn fire. They shoot him to shut him up. Have to. (237-38)

The reason Sixo is deemed “unsuitable” by schoolteacher is because he will never submit to the master narrative; symbolic of his resistant will, he “stopped speaking English because there was no future in it” (26). Sixo is significant because he represents the pure African heritage—“the wild man” (11). He is defiant and refuses to be controlled, and the reason he is able to do so is because his identity is intact. It is not the illusion of identity that Garner gives to the other Sweet Home men, but rather it comes from his former life. Because this is the case, he stubbornly maintains his identity. Furthermore, his relationship with the “Thirty-mile woman,” a lover he journeys to see despite the dangers of being caught, makes the mock-chivalry of Sethe and Halle’s union seem ridiculous by comparison. While the other Sweet Home men are content to “fuck cows”—an act that ironically foreshadows their eventual status under schoolteacher—and passively wait for pseudo-princess Sethe to choose a suitor, Sixo actively pursues a lover of his own choosing despite the dangers. As such, he is a natural man who is self-reliant and resourceful in every circumstance. He embraces the male-female dichotomy and revels in the actualization inherent to reproduction—he will live on in his children, and it is his confidence in that which makes him defiant in death. Because he has procreated, he knows the master narrative did not succeed in destroying him or his voice—his African voice.

Although this episode is alluded to throughout the novel, it is never recounted until very near the end. Morrison sets up a rhetorical triangulation that blasts apart the human-versus-animal dichotomy, adding a third alternative to the equation. Paul D. first hears of the infanticide from Stamp Paid while working at the slaughterhouse, which also

doubles as a place of prostitution. The slaughterhouse serves as a particularly potent bit of rhetorical violence that Morrison once again manipulates rhetorically by flipping the *enargeiac* value. The word itself refers to a specific place in which animals are killed and processed for consumption; however, Morrison intends to merge the ideas of slaughterhouse and brothel, or “whorehouse,” into the same metaphor by tightly compressing the association between these two images. The slaughter of swine has a religious significance in that many world religions consider them to be “unclean,” or unfit for consumption. That coupled with the fact that slaughterhouses are notoriously disgusting places—even today, the revolting odor can be detected from miles away—creates an unusually vivid metaphor that associates violence, death, and putrescence with the acts of prostitution that occur there as well. Morrison methodically, brilliantly, begins reconstructing the value of this scene by rhetorically creating a parallel between the image of the prostitutes “rut[ting] standing against the fences” (173) of the slaughterhouse yard and Sethe’s act of “rutting among the headstones with the engraver” (7) in exchange for Beloved’s tombstone. On the surface, it appears that Morrison intends for the black prostitutes to be aligned with the swine—that prostitution is a reprehensible practice that dehumanizes sexual intercourse by completely disconnecting the act from its procreative latency, love, and familial bonds; it also infuses the image with bestiality and death, which associates it with Sethe’s actions as well. These women, the “Sunday girls,” are regarded with disdain by the other black women in the community, which relegates their status to the lowest position in the lowest segment of society. Furthermore, the “consumption” of the black prostitutes by the white solicitors aligns the prostitutes with

the swine, which is clearly a metaphor for the black woman as-slave within and without the formalized institution of slavery, or more pointedly, the ineffectuality of the “slavery-as-nonfreedom” ideology expressed by Baby Suggs.

For Paul D., the human-animal dichotomy is of primary import. His response to Sethe when she tells him about murdering her child is, “You got two feet, not four” (173), implying that her act was bestial. Yet Paul D’s quick judgment is absurd, and his experience in the slaughterhouse should expose it as such: what animal has ever killed its offspring to spare it from the slaughterhouse? Sethe’s act is inherently human because only humans are cognizant enough to recognize the slaughterhouse for what it is. Paul D. cannot see the humanity of her act, however, because of his internal struggle with his own humanity—as such, he cannot help but be disgusted by what he assumes to be bestiality in those around him, like the prostitutes who work at the slaughterhouse. In a drunken stupor, before he revisits the memory of Sixo’s execution, he ponders,

Garner called and announced them men—but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? That was the wonder of Sixo, and even Halle; it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner’s gift or his own will? (237)

His question mirrors Burke’s observation of man as the “symbol-using animal”: “Do we simply use words, or do they not also use us?” (*Language* 6). The episode of Sixo’s execution is a central defining paradox for Paul D. and the source of his doubt about his

manhood—he struggles with the power of words to “define” (accurately or inaccurately) reality. His memory of Sixo’s death is bracketed by animalistic images. Paul D. is “tied like a mule” and he overhears schoolteacher discussing the “dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future” (238) as well as the absurdity of treating slaves like anything other than livestock. While he remembers Sixo’s execution and his triumphant cry of “Seven-O,” Paul D. is overwhelmed by the power of schoolteacher, the definer. It is by coming to terms with Sixo’s death that Paul D. is finally able to put Sethe’s act into the proper context, and this is facilitated by Stamp Paid who revalues it for Paul D. later in the narrative however with regard to a prostitute named Judith by making it clear that she does what she has to do to make a living. He tells Paul D. about Vashti, his former wife, who was forced to be the master’s lover. Stamp’s initial reaction was the desire to “snap her neck,” but when he realized that she had no choice in the matter, he instead decided to change his name and escape from the master’s control instead. His point is that the dehumanization of the act is inherent to the solicitor rather than the prostitute. While Sethe perceives “that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you: Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up,” (264), Stamp clarifies that while this is latent to the narrative, it can only happen if you succumb to the narrative and take it as your own. By revaluing the prostitutes—and Sethe’s act by proxy—Morrison flips the *enargeiac* value of the slaughterhouse-prostitution metaphor, and the johns clearly become the victimizers and the objects of the negative associations because, as Stamp

Paid clarifies, being victimized by the narrative does not make one an adherent to it—a truth that Paul D. (and Sethe) must come to embrace in order to move forward.

Morrison ultimately flips the value of the entire human-animal dichotomy in the triangulation of Sixo, Sethe and schoolteacher. All three are parents in the sense that Sixo's offspring is in the womb, representing potential, Sethe's is dead, representing suppression, and schoolteacher's are living and being indoctrinated with the narrative; hence, they represent actuality, or the living perpetuation of the narrative. Furthermore, schoolteacher is the "parent" of the slaves in the sense of being responsible for their existence. In this parental role, he kills these children by perpetuating the narrative. Sethe's murder of her child is potentially in parallel with this aspect of schoolteacher's parental role; however, it is Sixo's sacrifice that invalidates that association. Sixo's execution is triumphant for him because his song worked; he knows that he has activated a ritual that is facilitating the escape of the Thirty Mile Woman who is, in reality, only minutes ahead of them. He can laugh while the fire stubbornly refuses to burn because that will only further forestall the pursuers. Hence, Sixo's execution becomes the parallel to Beloved's because it is sacrificial. As such, Morrison is using this parallel to reinforce that the death of Beloved actually creates the opportunity for Denver to pass the story on, and she must do so both for Sethe and the audience because it is ironic, given that Sethe cuts Beloved's throat, or symbolically silences her voice. The fact that she used a handsaw (Margaret Garner used a knife) adds pathos to the event by heightening the visceral nature of the scene, but also expresses the violence with which she silenced the voice—she "saws" the child's head almost completely off. Hence, she saved her child

from the master narrative, but in doing so, she eliminated the possibility that the child would add her discourse to the redefinition of the narrative. Consequently, it was the death of this child—a blood sacrifice—that precludes Sethe and her other children from being returned to slavery, and ultimately leads to Denver learning to write and perpetuating the hope that she will change the narrative. Hence, the triangulation functions by driving Sixo between Sethe and schoolteacher, who are associated as perpetrators of infanticide. This corrects the problem of Sethe destroying the potential for the first daughter to change the narrative by transferring that potential to the second daughter; furthermore, it refines the sacrificial nature of the infanticide, which deviates all of the inherent force of the master narrative into itself while deflecting it away from the others. Denver can actualize a change to the narrative only because the death of Beloved created the potential for her to do so; otherwise, she would have fallen under the control of the narrative and been returned to the post-lapsarian Sweet Home of schoolteacher along with Sethe and her other children. Ultimately, it shifts the definition of what differentiates human behavior from animalistic behavior because Sethe's act is diametrically opposed to schoolteacher's execution of Sixo because she was motivated out of love for her child, and he was motivated out of a desire to control his property. Yet the problem remains and is rarified that neither behaved in an animalistic fashion: one was simply good and the other evil, but both were inherently human. Hence, the human-animal dichotomy collapses as illogical, which clarifies that the only possible dichotomy is human-inhuman.



### **Interpreting the Argument**

Morrison, in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, uses the old story of a wise old blind woman approached by two children who attempt to trick her. Concealing a live bird, the children ask her to predict whether it is alive or dead, planning to facilitate a failure either way, contingent upon the answer they receive. In her wisdom, the wise old woman responds, “I don’t know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands.” The moral is that agency demands responsibility, and Morrison provides an interpretation by making the bird representational of language and the children representational of writers. She asks rhetorical questions in this regard as a writer about the living/dead state of language, and in doing so, she characterizes “official language” as something “smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege is a suit of armor polished to shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago.” It is a dead thing that nonetheless controls society. The result is that “children have bitten their tongues off and use bullets instead to iterate the voice of speechlessness, of disabled and disabling language” because the “heads of state and power merchants” propagate “evacuated language” which leaves the children “with no access to what is left of their human instincts” because its only purpose is to “force obedience.” Morrison detects causality in this dead language of control; she interprets it as the catalyst behind the “bullets”:

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the

proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (“Nobel”)

Hence, latent in this official language is the potential for violence, which is causally connected to its actualization, and as such, the language itself is violent—it violates justice, knowledge, cooperation, humanity and education by forcing conformity without validating questioning.<sup>6</sup> This forced conformity takes the form of masking the violations to sustain the ideology that drives it, or as Deleuze and Guattari observe, “Cruelty has nothing to do with some ill-defined or natural violence that might be commissioned to

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6 Morrison elaborates further, “There is and will be rousing language to keep citizens armed and arming; slaughtered and slaughtering in the malls, courthouses, post offices, playgrounds, bedrooms and boulevards; stirring, memorializing language to mask the pity and waste of needless death. There will be more diplomatic language to countenance rape, torture, assassination. There is and will be more seductive, mutant language designed to throttle women, to pack their throats like paté-producing geese with their own unsayable, transgressive words; there will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute; language glamorized to thrill the dissatisfied and bereft into assaulting their neighbors; arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness.” (“Nobel”)

explain the history of mankind; cruelty is the movement of culture that is realized in bodies and inscribed on them, belaboring them. That is what cruelty means” (144).

In typical Morrison fashion, she inverts the original illustration to change its meaning. The old woman becomes the arrogant sustainer of the narrative, coyly using shame to suppress the children’s honest speculation. As such, she models a type of response that we take for granted because the narrative is so pervasive we forget to question its wisdom. The children chastise her for her pride:

We have heard all our short lives that we have to be responsible. What could that possibly mean in the catastrophe this world has become; where, as a poet said, “nothing needs to be exposed since it is already barefaced.” Our inheritance is an affront. You want us to have your old, blank eyes and see only cruelty and mediocrity. Do you think we are stupid enough to perjure ourselves again and again with the fiction of nationhood? How dare you talk to us of duty when we stand waist deep in the toxin of your past? You trivialize us and trivialize the bird that is not in our hands. Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong? You are an adult.... For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don’t tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief’s wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear’s caul. You, old woman, blessed with blindness, can speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without

pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names.

Language alone is meditation. (“Nobel”)

If the old blind woman is to symbolize the writer, then Morrison is defining the role of writer while she is concurrently admonishing writers to be aware of their influence. She includes herself in that company, and this speech provides a great deal of insight into her perception of her role as a writer of fiction. The depth to which she perceives her art as an exercise in rhetoric is profound.

Of course, the “official language” she refers to is the primary locus of argument in *Beloved*. It is the “master narrative,” the great evil that must be affronted at the cost of blood, and that is why Morrison’s use of rhetorical violence is so effective. But official language is a snapshot of language itself, anachronistic and dead. The truth is that language is dynamic; therefore, the narrative is constantly in flux, and as such, it is like the birth process, which is inherently violent and always rests on a knife-edge between agency and dissolution: it can result in new life or death—sometimes the mother dies, or the child is stillborn, or both. What the children need to know from the old woman is what is there in human experience that is *a priori*? What is concrete and what is up for speculation? The answer is difficult to ascertain because the narrative often defines truth to suit its own purposes—but what is irreducible? Perhaps there is no bird in the hand after all; perhaps all meaning is in flux. Perhaps we are merely high-functioning animals, but if this is the case, then partaking in defining the narrative becomes the highest human function of all.

Other elements of the myth appear in *Beloved* as well—Baby Suggs is the old blind woman, Sethe is the victim of the narrative, Beloved is the child who has bitten off its tongue and schoolteacher is power merchant. Denver is the child holding the bird.

*Beloved* . . . constructs its ideal listener. Denver will tell and retell the story that she now understands. Like Pheoby in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Denver uses the knowledge of “horror,” transmitted to her aurally, to perform a healing narrative—orally. And like Pheoby, Denver represents the implied community of ideal readers, the “aural being.” What, finally, Denver is to *Beloved* is the space for hearing the tale of infanticide with a degree of understanding—both as the sister of the murdered baby and as the living daughter of the loving mother, Denver, that is, is a site of participation.” (Rushdy 56).

If Denver models the correct interpretation of the infanticide scene, she also models the stages of denial and confusion, and ultimately, Morrison’s directive for action in response to it. Denver begins the story curiously underdeveloped—in 1857, she would have been eighteen years old; however, she behaves and thinks like a child.

Her first cognizance of the infanticide comes when she is seven. A classmate named Nelson Lord asks her “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” (110), and after that, Denver does not speak or hear again for two years. The child’s question creates in Denver two things that model possible responses to the violence of the master narrative—fear of her mother and implied complicity which renders guilt. Denver responds by willfully removing herself from discourse to *protect* herself from its inherent violence—she is in denial. The

appearance of the baby ghost, and eventually Beloved, are incarnations of the cry for justice manifested as pure force. This power is amoral in and of itself; yet, it is also intractable. Hence, those who interact with it are free to code it as they choose. Sethe interprets it as blame, and she responds, ultimately with guilt. Denver, initially confuses it with love, desiring Beloved's attention while being thwarted at every turn by Beloved's constant devotion to Sethe. But Sethe has a unique relationship to Beloved that is defined by the sacrificial rite more so than the mother-child bond. The innocent already-crawling baby stood outside of the master narrative just as Denver does until Sethe, by an act of her will, made her the scapegoat—the object upon which the narrative was actualized in propitiation for Denver and the others; hence, the bond between Sethe and Beloved is one that Denver can never share. She sees that Beloved is a secret that she and her mother have tried desperately to keep, but in doing so, the powerful truth is draining Sethe of all of her life-force: Beloved is literally starving Sethe to death. The reality is that repressing the truth that Beloved represents is behind Denver's stunted maturation as well. She never leaves home because someone else might ask her Nelson Lord's question; consequently, she is developmentally stuck at age seven, frozen in time. Furthermore, at this point in the narrative, she discovers that repressing the truth that Beloved represents is not a workable solution either. She must confess the truth to a community and draw upon its strength because the power manifested in Beloved is too great for two individuals to control—as such, Beloved functions as a central *enargeiac* metaphor because she represents something essential about the rhetorical power of the truth: it is amoral, but the power must be released or else it is self-destructive.

When faced with the decision to leave home on her own for the first time in eleven years, Denver is visited by the spirit of Baby Suggs, but this does not indicate a return to Suggs's philosophy. Rather, Suggs appearance does two things: she places Denver into a wider historical context by telling her a story about her relatives, and she encourages Denver to act regardless of the possible consequences because the ability to act is the one thing she has. When Denver chooses to direct the power of the truth represented by *Beloved* outward by confession, she places her personal experience into the milieu of the community history—she gives it a broader context, which in turn acts reflexively to give her and her mother a broader context as well, and in turn, dissipates the power of the truth that *Beloved* represents; consequently, the violence is redirected as well. It is revealed that Sethe's act is not isolated. She learns that others, including her own mother, committed the act, which normalizes the infanticide somewhat. It becomes the catalyst behind the exorcism of *Beloved* through the character of Ella:

Was it true the dead daughter come back? Or a pretend? Was it whipping Sethe? Ella had been beaten every way but down. She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the belt were thick as rope around her waist. She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by "the lowest yet." It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of the pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working, and the Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all know what the sound sounded like. (272)

Ella's outcry activates the thirty other women who have gathered outside 124, and they all instinctively respond with a "sound" more ancient than words, beyond all narratives; they "searched for the right combination, the key, the code that broke the back of words" (275). This language-beyond-language, a veritable soundwave, washes over Sethe "like the baptized" and breaks her from the grip of Beloved, the grip of self incrimination and repression. Conveniently, Mr. Bodwin, her feeble white landlord just happens to appear at the same time. In this climactic moment, Sethe is enabled by the community intervention to deflect the culpability from herself and focus it on Bodwin as a representative of the narrative. In her emaciated and confused state, she confuses him with schoolteacher, thinking he has come to take Beloved again, only this time, she focuses her violence on the criminal rather than the victim. This turn marks the disappearance of Beloved and Sethe's ultimate freedom. Hence, Denver, by placing their story into the larger narrative of the community, activates the healing and recovery of herself, her mother, and the community itself. Now Paul D. can "put his story beside" Sethe's (287) because she has stepped out of the past in order to live in the present.

The irony in the final chapter of the novel, implicit in the litany, "It was not a story to pass on" (289), is Morrison's admonishment to the reader. She is commenting on the way *this* story, the dehumanizing truth of slavery, has been repressed in the American consciousness. It is a challenge to the reader to reject repression and follow Denver's model and confess it, make it a part of the national consciousness, the national narrative, and thereby dissipate its latent destructive power. As such, Morrison's accomplishment demonstrates the value of the rhetoric of violence as a tool for positive change in the way



people basically think about themselves and the world—the ideologies behind human action. Burke observes:

An “ideology” is like a god coming down to earth, where it will inhabit a place pervaded by its presence. An “ideology” is like a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways; and that same body would have hopped around in different ways had a different ideology happened to inhabit it. (*Language* 6)

If man is the symbol-using animal, as Burke contends, and we are bound to act via language which serves to create a kind of “naïve verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in [our] notions of reality” (Burke, *Language* 5), then we are utterly dependent upon those like Morrison to raise the standard for what it means to be human—to help us see that the violence that plagues the human condition is not so much a result of our bestiality as it is our ideologies.

## CHAPTER IV

“MAYBE THE POINT IS NOT TO FORGET THE REST OF YOURSELF IF ONE  
LITTLE PART MIGHT GO BAD”: PSYCHOSIS AND THE VIOLENCE OF  
ALTERITY IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK’S *FIGHT CLUB*

*Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk’s acerbic psychological satire about a paranoid schizophrenic’s violent attempts to reintegrate his multiple-gendered personalities, enjoyed a slight grassroots following until David Fincher’s film version made it an international phenomenon. However, as is often the case with psychological novels, it does not translate very well to the medium of film primarily because most of the action of the story is an internal dialogue between the nameless protagonist’s multiple personalities. The film version suffers from being presented primarily from the perspective of the Tyler Durden personality, and it fails to suggest the possibility that all the other major characters are delusions as well, principally Marla Singer and Robert Paulson (“Big Bob”)—not to mention the multitudes of unnamed support group members, fight clubbers and Space Monkeys. As such, the film emphasizes the hyperbolic masculine themes tied to the Tyler character and downplays the ironic, satirical qualities that Palahniuk infuses them with in the novel.

But why is the novel so violent? Palahniuk states in an interview with Sara Tomlinson that he got the idea for *Fight Club* after he got into a fistfight during a weekend camping trip: “They just beat the crap out of me. . . . My face was so bashed and

so horrible-looking. It was blacked-out for three months. And it just slowly changed colors before it got back to being a white person's face. And the whole time, no one at work acknowledged it" (Tomlinson). Shortly thereafter, he read an interview with comedienne "Amy Sedarius in which she described showing up for a photo shoot made up to look as if she'd been beaten. The makeup artist simply attempted to cover up the bruises. Without wiping off the makeup, she then went to her job as a waitress. In an eight-hour shift, only one person asked her if she was OK" (Tomlinson). He gathered from their mutual experiences that, "You could really do anything you wanted in your personal life, as long as you looked so bad that people would not want to know the details" (Tomlinson). Hence, Palahniuk's inspiration for the violence of *Fight Club* came about due to his personal insights into it as a way of creating alterity—as a result of his fistfight, he became something unrecognizable to himself and others: no longer a "white man."

Palahniuk frequently mentions his experience as a hospice escort in the Seattle area in the years just prior to writing *Fight Club* while he was employed as a mechanic. In the article "Escort," he tells the story of how he came to be involved in hospice and about his association with many destitute victims of disease:

I drove people with cancer to see the ocean for the last time. I drove people with AIDS to the top of Mount Hood so they could see the whole world while there was still time. I sat bedside while the nurse told me what to look for at the moment of death, the gasping and unconscious struggle of someone drowning in their sleep as renal failure filled their lungs with water. The monitor would beep every

five or ten seconds as it injected morphine into the patient. The patient's eyes would roll back, bulging and entirely white. You held their cold hand for hours, until another escort came to the rescue or until it didn't matter. I was twenty-five years old, and the next day I was back under trucks with maybe three or four hours sleep. Only now my own problems didn't seem very bad. Just looking at my hands and feet, marveling at the weight I could lift, the way I could shout against the pneumatic roar of the shop, my whole life felt like a miracle instead of a mistake. ("Escort")

His description of the experience sounds a great deal like the nameless protagonist of his novel when he attends the support groups. Yet the turning point for Palahniuk comes when he has the experience of escorting an AIDS victim who fell asleep next to a sauna heater in a gay bath house which literally cooked his leg, resulting in its amputation. Upon his death bed, the man asked Palahniuk to remove the sex paraphernalia from his apartment so his mother wouldn't find it:

I quit being an escort. Maybe because after the man with one leg, after he died, after his sex toys were all garbage bagged, after they were buried in the Dumpster, after the apartment windows were open and the smell of leather and latex and shit was gone, the apartment looked good. The sofa-bed was a tasteful mauve, the walls and carpet, cream. The little kitchen had butcher block counter tops. The bathroom was all white and clean. I sat there in the tasteful silence. I could've lived there. Anyone could've lived there. ("Escort")

While Palahniuk's experience with people on the verge of death gave him a sense of empowerment, just as it does for the *Fight Club* protagonist, his experience with the one-legged man, particularly when he cleaned out his apartment, brought the reality of death, and specifically the random quality of death by disease, too close to his own life. After this experience, he stopped working as a hospice volunteer.

Like Morrison in *Beloved*, Palahniuk is interested in alterity, and he uses rhetorical violence in *Fight Club* to create situations and arguments to explore how we dehumanize others. The kernel of truth at the center of *Fight Club* is this aspect of human nature: we intuitively avoid the sick and the damaged person, and by doing so, we make them "other" than human by instinctively cutting them out of the herd and leaving them to be the victims of natural selection. This is the shock he describes in his recounting of his hospice experience: as long as the victims were "others," homosexuals or IV drug users, Palahniuk could pity them. The alterity created a means of distancing himself from these individuals; once that perception-based buffer was removed, however, he discovered this truth: we can only extend our compassion to those who are in no way like us. Aristotle, in his discussion of the use of pity as a means of persuasion, warns that while people tend to

pity their acquaintances, unless they are very closely connected to their household, and in that case, they feel for them as they feel about their own future suffering; this is why Amasis . . . did not weep when his son was led off to death but did [weep] for a friend reduced to begging; for the latter was pitiable, the former dreadful; for the dreadful is something different from the pitiable and

capable of expelling pity and often useful to the opponent; for people no longer pity when something dreadful is near themselves. (*On Rhetoric* 8.12-13)

It is this basic human reaction that is at the center of *Fight Club*, which is one reason it is such a difficult novel—it satirizes compassion in late 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America: how we voyeuristically use the suffering of others to “feel good about ourselves” without actually connecting with them as persons. The rhetorical violence in the book is used to create “others” out of the protagonist and the characters that populate the story, and the protagonist’s incurable disease—schizophrenia—serves as the primary controlling satirical metaphor for the consumerism-based ideology that masks, hides, and alienates those who cannot achieve it: the victims of disease and poverty who are non-participants in the drive for affluence that characterized the American Dream in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fragmentation of the protagonist’s personality mirrors the polarization of the acceptable versus unacceptable groups in society as defined by the overarching social ideology. The two poles of the protagonist’s psychosis—Marla and Tyler—embody, respectively, the victims of disease and poverty and, on the other hand, the social ideology that champions individualism and personal agency over inherent human worth.

### **Conflicting Ideologies in *Fight Club***

Like O’Connor and Morrison, Palahniuk uses existentialist-based concepts of personal enlightenment, or “self-actualization,” in conflict with socially-endorsed definitions of identity as a foundational premise. He has stated in interviews that the

rationale behind *Fight Club* is informed by his reading of Michel Foucault. In an interview with the *Village Voice*, Palahniuk stated,

We really have no freedom about creating our identities, because we are trained to want what we want. What is it going to take to break out and establish some modicum of freedom, despite all the cultural training that's been our entire existence? It's about doing the things that are completely forbidden, that we are trained not to want to do. In *Fight Club*, it was that we are taught to avoid violence. ("Extreme")

He goes on to say that the point of the violence for the protagonist is to "destroy an identity that was being imposed upon him by society" ("Extreme"). The connection to Foucault is clear in Palahniuk's comments: a common theme in Foucault is the idea that governmental and social institutions function to oppress natural human behavior and the individual's "true" identity. He concerned himself during his twenty-five years of writing with the technologies of power and the reasons why individuals conform to the rules of society.

Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* is of particular import to the theme of *Fight Club* wherein he sets about to expose the changing social definitions and applications of "folly" and "madness" from the end of the sixteenth through the eighteenth century wherein madness shifted from being a comic symbol to *memento mori* in the Renaissance representing the death of the body by picturing death of the mind. Foucault sees social attitudes toward madness as having emerged to fill the social need for a scapegoat created by the disappearance of leprosy

between 1200 and 1400. He documents the emergence of the clinical treatment of madness, born of the social unrest and economic depression in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which resulted in the practice of incarcerating the mentally ill alongside criminals and indigents. His central claim, that mental illness is a myth fashioned out of discourse and human institutions, is driven by his insistence that social institutions (rationalism, in particular) create definitions of normative behavior that benefit the establishment and promulgation of those institutions. It profits the institution to regard expressions of individuality outside of those norms as alterity and to seek to ostracize, banish, punish, or incarcerate those individuals in order to reinforce conformity.

Hence madness is the characteristic of being unable or unwilling to abide by the rules of social conduct, in Foucault's view. This was facilitated during the classical period by the rationale that confinement of the mentally ill protected society from "animal freedom"—in contrast to Christian/social "freedom"—as a control measure to reinforce societal definitions of reality and behavior—the same source that informed the human-versus-animal dichotomy in *Beloved*. The "animal" metaphor for madness is an old one that shifted to accommodate social ideologies. In the Middle Ages, the association was based in an "innocent" alterity, or "familiar strangeness, its menacing marvels, its entire weight of dumb anxiety" (*Madness* 73)—fear inducing, but not morally coded. With the growing influence of Christianity in later centuries and its dichotomy of the "spiritual" man versus the "natural" man, the animal/madman metaphor took on a diabolical quality and came to be associated with a "visible sign of infernal powers." Ultimately, it came to



function as a way of disassociating the madman “from what is specifically human in him; not in order to deliver him over to other powers, but simply to establish him at the zero degree of his own nature” (*Madness* 74). The implications of this, Foucault notes, are implicit within the metaphoric concept:

It is not on this horizon of nature that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries recognizes madness, but against a background of Unreason; madness did not disclose a mechanism, but revealed a liberty raging in the monstrous forms of animality. We no longer understand unreason today, except in its epithetic form: The Unreasonable, a sign attached to conduct or speech, and betraying to the layman’s eyes the presence of madness and all its pathological train; for us the unreasonable is only one of madness’s modes of appearance. On the contrary, unreason, for classicism, had a nominal value; it constituted a kind of substantial function. It was in relation to unreason and to it alone that madness could be understood. Unreason was its support; or let us say that unreason defined the locus of madness’s possibility. For classical man, madness was not the natural condition, the human psychological root of unreason which threatens man and envelops—at a tremendous distance—all forms of his natural existence. It was not a question of tending toward a determinism, but of being swallowed up in darkness. More effectively than any other kind of rationalism, better in any case than our positivism, classical rationalism could watch out for and guard against the subterranean danger of unreason, that threatening space of an absolute freedom. (*Madness* 83-84).

Foucault proposes that what came to be regarded as “madness” was actually defined by the individual’s inability to adapt to and accommodate social behavioral modalities, which he considers to be constructs derived from the ideology that supports the primary social mechanisms and institutions. The madman was dangerous because he assumes an unbridled, wild, or “animal” freedom that flouts society’s authority to define the context within which freedom is permissible, and in doing so, reveals social norms as constructs—folly and unreason—rather than *a priori*, intrinsic aspects of humanity itself. This logic, of course, is consistent with the animal association: If it is common knowledge that human existence is a dichotomous struggle between good and evil, soul and body, spirit and animal, then it is not a great leap in logic to the general perception that the “mad” person—someone who has “*lost their mind*”—would necessarily be nothing *but* animal. While there are many psychoses that do not fit cleanly into Foucault’s premise, there are many that do, assuming that mental illnesses have not been eliminated due to natural selection because they are actually the result of elaborate psychological defense mechanisms.

While Foucault’s work informs the use of madness in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk is obviously not interested in presenting an argument about madness, but rather he uses it metaphorically to express the fragmentation of the social ideology in question. Palahniuk takes Foucault’s social theory and compresses it into one character’s struggle for identity; as such, the protagonist symbolically makes a transformation from being a social conformist to an anarchist, and hence, “mad.” In *Fight Club*, existentialist philosophy serves as a rationale that validates the violence in the mind of Tyler Durden, a primitivist/

nihilist who preaches that morality is a socially-constructed myth, and a person's individuality is only revealed by the violation of social norms. While he pushes the protagonist to reject consumerist ideology, what he erects in its place is simply the philosophical skeleton beneath the façade—fight club is nothing more than a distillation of the “dog-eat-dog” mentality of corporate America where everyone is objectified and the struggle for power is the ultimate goal. Project Mayhem, conversely, serves as an icon of corporate America itself where workers are nothing but faceless cogs in a corporate machine of dehumanization and destruction. While the primary conflict at work is the idea that socially-prescribed definitions of “self,” or “ontology,” are dehumanizing, the existentialist-informed one propagated by Tyler is not really an alternative but rather a more rarified form of the ideology the protagonist is so desperate to escape in the first place.

### **Causal Connection**

The primary way in which Palahniuk uses rhetorical violence in *Fight Club* is as a way of creating the sense of dehumanization inherent to the ideology that the nameless protagonist is trying to escape. He moves the character through stages of passive and active forms of internalized and externalized violence as he struggles to achieve the necessary agency for self-actualization. His violent struggle to achieve a unified self, of course, is coupled with psychosis, first, as a metaphoric representation of the madness and dehumanization of his “normal” life, and reflexively, the madness and dehumanization he embraces to confront that. The conflict builds as the protagonist

struggles against reintegrating the divergent factions of himself, killing off some while protecting others, but he never accomplishes that goal. Initially, the protagonist participates in passive externalized violence in the form of voyeuristically participating in support groups for victims of terminal disease. As his personality becomes more distinctly fractured, the violence he creates manifests itself in two consensually self-destructive forms—active internalized violence represented by Tyler, and passive internalized violence represented by Marla. Finally, as the protagonist ambivalently struggles to reintegrate his personalities, he begins to resort to terrorism, or active externalized violence against innocent victims.

The second chapter begins with a description of the protagonist's life before his psychotic break—a time-compressed blur of airports, “single-serving friends,” (31) and corporate travel in the pursuit of his career as “a recall campaign coordinator.” He explains his job as follows:

Wherever I'm going, I'll be there to apply the formula. I'll keep the secret intact. It's simple arithmetic. It's a story problem. If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall? You take the population of vehicles in the field (*A*) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (*B*), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (*C*). *A* times *B* times *C* equals *X*. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall. If *X* is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If *X* is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't

recall. Everywhere I go, there's the burned-up wadded-up shell of a car waiting for me. I know where all the skeletons are. Consider this my job security. (30-31)

Palahniuk uses rhetorical violence here to project the dehumanization of his protagonist's career into the mind of the reader on an emotional level. The stilted, mathematical language converts human tragedy, ironically, to the statistics of a cost-benefit analysis that weighs profit margins against the value of human life. His task is not to rectify the problem, but simply to measure the financial impact it may have on his company.

Furthermore, he is directly exposed to severe violence on a daily basis because he has to examine the accident remains in order to do these assessments. The irony is implicit, of course: although some cars crash and burn "with everyone trapped inside," the protagonist has the God-like power to prevent it from happening again; yet like the executioner of the High Court of Justice, he can only do so within the ideologically-defined parameters of his job description and the "formula" that he is "there to apply" (31). Neither he nor the reader can take comfort in the fact that "no one gets hurt" so long as it is cost effective because there are very real "skeletons" to be hidden, and it is his job to "keep the secret intact" (31). Hence, the implication of the rhetoric is that the "skeleton" in the closet of corporate America is that value of human life is quantifiable—it is appropriate, expected, that compassion is measured against cost.

The protagonist's reaction to suppressing the dehumanization inherent to his job manifests itself as insomnia, although it is later revealed that he is psychotic. Near the end of the novel, he refers to Tyler as a "disassociative (*sic*) personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state" to which the Tyler personality responds, "maybe you're *my*

schizophrenic hallucination” (159). As such, Palahniuk opens the possibility of two distinct possible clinical diagnoses for the protagonist as indicated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*: a dissociative personality disorder or paranoid schizophrenia, with the latter being the more likely of the two given the character’s delusions, hallucinations, social and occupational dysfunction, flattened affect, paranoia, and the bipolar nature of his personalities (Tyler being the manic/Marla being the depressive) (American 285).<sup>1</sup> Self-mutilation is another typical symptom that the protagonist, Tyler, and Marla all share—the chemical burn on their hands and Marla’s cigarette burns are a few examples, which, of course, are tantamount to a “brand” of identity: all of his distinct personalities are branded with the “Tyler kiss” chemical burn indicating that they are all actually the protagonist. As such, it is a rhetorical way of expressing their common self-worthlessness in the protagonist’s mind. Furthermore, these distinct personalities are often aware of each other, as is the primary personality, and are often at odds with each other—the *DSM-IV* notes, “If these types of hallucinations are present, then only this single symptom is needed” to diagnose an

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1 Certainly, the assumption that Marla is another distinct personality within the protagonist’s psyche is less obvious than Tyler, but only because the reader is informed that Tyler is a delusion directly. Both Marla and Tyler appear at a moment of crisis in the life of the protagonist. Marla’s appearance, like Tyler’s, is rhetorically demarcated: “This is how I met Tyler” (25) / “This is how I met Marla” (39). Perhaps the strongest evidence of all, however, is that “Marla has the scar from Tyler’s kiss on the back of her hand” (106), just like the protagonist. While there must be any number of support groups in any given metropolitan area, and certainly more than one person would be able to attend on a regular basis, it is noteworthy that the conflict between them arises because Marla attends all of the same meetings that the protagonist does (18, 38), not to mention the oddity that both Marla and the protagonist are physically healthy people who are attending these meetings to experience the same sort of emotional “therapy.” Hence, the implication follows that this episode, like Tyler’s sculpting at the nude beach, is witnessed only by the protagonist (“I was the only one watching this” [32]).

individual with schizophrenia (American 275). Also, the protagonist's inability to account for blocks of time in which he is the Tyler personality is also in keeping with the diagnosis. Yet, his doctor misdiagnoses the problem and refuses to give him any medication, suggesting instead that he "swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night. See the brain parasites, See the degenerative bone diseases. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by" (9). At this point, the protagonist's dementia ensues, and it is reasonable to assume that the support meetings he attends are part of that psychosis. A paranoid schizophrenic, the real issue for the character is control of his environment, and the alternate reality he creates is an attempt to establish control in that private realm which he lacks in the soulless and dehumanizing corporate world that governs his primary existence.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist finds himself unable to summon any emotional response to his dehumanizing existence—he can neither weep nor strike out; the multiple personalities he creates are representative of his fractured sense of self.

Significantly, the protagonist's psychotic break takes a violent form that reflects the violence of his career in that he takes his doctor's advice and begins attending support groups for victims of terminal illnesses. In this context, he is a passive observer of natural

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2 "The essential feature of the Paranoid Type of Schizophrenia is the presence of prominent delusions or auditory hallucinations in the context of a relative preservation of cognitive functioning and affect. Delusions are typically persecutory or grandiose, or both, but delusions with some other theme (e.g., jealousy, religiosity, or somatization) may also occur. The delusions may be multiple, but are usually organized around a coherent theme. Hallucinations are also typically related to the content of the delusional theme. Associated features include anxiety, anger, aloofness, and argumentativeness. The individual may have a superior and patronizing manner and either a stilted, formal quality or extreme intensity in interpersonal interactions. The persecutory themes may predispose the individual to suicidal behavior, and the combination of persecutory and grandiose delusions with anger may predispose the individual to violence" (American 287).

violence beyond his control, yet in a controlled environment where it is appropriate for him to express emotions he is otherwise uncomfortable with—in other words, he is allowed to cry. The protagonist is able to keep these victims at a distance; as if watching reality television, he is able to experience a cathartic response from their suffering without actually participating in it himself:

I felt more alive than I'd ever felt. I wasn't host to cancer or blood parasites; I was the little warm center that the life of the world crowded around. And I slept.

Babies don't sleep this well. Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born.

Resurrected. (12-13)

He feels so “alive” after visiting these groups because, relatively speaking, his co-mourners are the walking dead—the “support” the groups actually offer them is the permission to cry at their own funerals—to prepare themselves for the death sentences they face. By proxy, the protagonist experiences a catharsis: he feels “good,” but not because he has actually done anything on behalf of these victims; he’s just glad he’s not one of them. Palahniuk’s use of satire is brutal, and he sets up a rhetorical model here that he will use throughout the rest of the narrative that essentially involves using rhetorical violence to strip the protagonist’s perspective of any compassion whatsoever revealing its nihilistic underpinnings.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the support group members, the protagonist is clearly using them for his own ends—their suffering is his entertainment; as such, Palahniuk is implicating American society’s response to poverty and suffering in the

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to O'Connor’s approach in *Wise Blood*.



media age as being of a similar quality as well. The protagonist's ability to use them as such is reliant upon his ability to view them as non-persons. Their social position is liminal in the sense that they are no longer useful members of society, but rather a burden on it. Like the hospice patients Palahniuk assisted prior to the amputee victim, the protagonist uses their illness to marginalize them in his mind, and he is banking on the readers' ability to recognize this tendency in themselves as well.

While *Fight Club* is widely regarded to be a sort of masculine manifesto, in reality, the gender-specific themes of the book have more to do with their role in self-definition than sexual politics: the gender ambiguity of the support group members is simply a metaphor for their alterity—a hyperbolic way of emphasizing their marginalization. Palahniuk enhances the subtle violence of disease as a metaphor by emphasizing the loss of their gender-specific identities as a by-product of their illnesses—what is left is a freak show of humanoids that are neither male nor female. The protagonist relates that he did not “cry” and experience catharsis until he attended the testicular cancer group and met Robert “Big Bob” Paulson for the first time, who singles out the protagonist for the “therapeutic physical contact.” A former bodybuilder who suffered testicular cancer and now possesses “tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God’s as big” (16), he squeezes the protagonist between them and encourages him to “[g]o on now and cry” (17). Big Bob’s “bitch tits” serve as a hermaphroditic metaphor by coupling an overt physical symbol of masculinity in the image of bodybuilding with an overt physical symbol for femininity in breasts—he is a confusing amalgamation of man-woman. Significantly, the name of this support group, “Remaining Men Together,” serves

as a double entendre that elucidates the alterity inherent to the metaphoric function these individuals serve in the mind of the protagonist—its members are remaining *men* together because they have lost the portion of their anatomy to which their sexual identity is most strongly attached, and they need other men to bolster that identity because they are *the remains of men*. Like the hermaphroditic Bob, whatever they are is whatever is left over once their manhood has been removed, and whatever that *is* is something *other* than a man.

Chloe, like Big Bob, represents a gender-neutral presence that is manifested in her extremely sexualized behavior. The protagonist notes of her, “All Chloe wanted was to get laid for the last time. Not intimacy, sex.” (19); hence, Chloe, too, is inverted in that she approaches sex in the way typically associated with men.<sup>4</sup> She announces three times that she “had pornographic movies at home in her apartment” as well as other sexual paraphernalia. However, her disease, like Big Bob’s, has robbed her of any reproductive potential which is reflected in her skeleton-like, and decidedly non-feminine, appearance: “the seat of her pants hanging down sad and empty,” or as the protagonist observes, “Normally, I’d be sporting an erection. Our Chloe, however, is a skeleton dipped in yellow wax” (20). Hence, Chloe’s condition functions as an ambivalent metaphor for alterity as well—she is a woman with a man’s sexual ethic who can’t “get laid.”

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4 Chloe’s highly-sexualized behavior is in contrast to the comment the protagonist makes about his life as an apartment dweller: “I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (43). Consequently, she represents the protagonist’s overall perception that men have become feminized, replacing the objectification of women with a different kind of objectification: furniture and “nesting.”

Furthermore, her desperate attempts to secure a sex partner and her promiscuity enhance the metaphor that Chloe represents: it's "not intimacy," just "sex" that Chloe wants, or the separation of the sex act from personhood—a distortion of the traditional coupling of intimacy and relationship as an inherently feminine quality.

Both Big Bob and Chloe are marginalized by their lack of identity, and their gender ambiguity is created by social ideological-based definitions of self—they are manifestations of Palahniuk's observation that "[w]e really have no freedom about creating our identities, because we are trained to want what we want" (Village Voice). Consequently, gender-specific definitions become a way of marginalizing them for the protagonist. Neither Big Bob nor Chloe is capable of securing or maintaining an intimate personal relationship, and this amplifies their status as non-persons. Big Bob has been married and divorced three times (21). He is bankrupt and has two grown kids who won't return his calls (22). Chloe seeks out emotional dishonesty because, as an alternate personality, she represents the protagonist's own inability to connect emotionally: her inappropriately personal "honesty" mimics sexual promiscuity-as-intimacy while exposing it as an inauthentic means of closeness. She tells the protagonist, "the worst thing about her brain parasites was no one would have sex with her," not that no one would love her. Of course, this is a justification for the protagonist not to have any real feelings for her as a person, let alone as a potential sexual partner.

Ultimately, Big Bob and Chloe represent society's victims in general, and the violences they experience represent one of the novel's fatalistic extremes—their demise is meaningless because they have no inherent worth. As such, they are a burden on

society, their dependency is offensive and off-putting, and their only value, it would seem, is to provide emotional release/entertainment for people like the protagonist.

Consider his imagined account of Chloe's passing:

Picture Chloe's ... skeleton the size of an insect, running through the vaults and galleries of her innards at two in the morning. Her pulse a siren overhead, announcing: Prepare for death in ten, in nine, in eight seconds. Death will commence is seven, six ... At night, Chloe ran around the maze of her own collapsing veins and burst tubes spraying hot lymph. Nerves surface as trip wires in the tissue. Abscesses swell in the tissue around her as hot white pearls. The overhead announcement, prepare to evacuate bowels in ten, in nine, eight, seven. Prepare to evacuate soul in ten, in nine, eight. Chloe's splashing through the ankle-deep backup of renal fluid from her failed kidneys. Death will commence in five. Five, four. Four. Around her, parasitic life spray paints her heart. Four, three. Three, two. Chloe climbs hand-over-hand up the curdled lining of her own throat. Death to commence in three, in two. Moonlight shines in through the open mouth. Prepare for the last breath, now. Evacuate. Now. Soul clear of body. Now. Death commences. Now. Oh, this should be so sweet, the remembered warm jumble of Chloe still in my arms and Chloe dead somewhere. (26-27)

In this intensely graphic scene, the protagonist visualizes Chloe's soul clamoring its way out her body, and its movie-like quality emphasizes the voyeuristic appeal for him. Her essential being is "insect"-like, and decidedly not-human. While he reasons "this should be so sweet," the death of Chloe does not satisfy because, in keeping with the escalating

nature of violence in the story, the protagonist at this point becomes immune to its latent cathartic power due to the law of diminishing returns.

Chloe's death is coupled with the first appearance of Marla, whose presence short-circuits the protagonist's ability to continue in emotional limbo by exposing him as a voyeur:

Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth. Everyone clinging and risking to share their worst fear, that their death is coming head-on and the barrel of a gun is pressed against the back of their throats. . . . all of a sudden even death and dying rank right down there with plastic flowers on video as a non-event. (13)

Once again, Palahniuk invokes a reference to "video," which clearly associates the protagonist's actions with televised or cinematic violence and the troubling emergence of his greater callousness. However, Marla and the protagonist's reaction to her are of primary import to understanding the violence in this scene. Her very presence exposes him as a "liar," a "faker"; he has no compassion for Chloe or Big Bob, and Marla's intervention clarifies that because she has become the amalgam of all the support group victims—the iconic victim—and he reviles her because she exposes his true lack of compassion for them. Palahniuk projects onto the Marla character all of the stereotypes used by society to marginalize the poor, the infirm and destitute: she is a parasite upon society, she is lascivious, she self-mutilates with a burning cigarette, she considers herself to be "a monster bitch monster" (61) and "infectious human waste"; she "has no faith in herself," and she wants "to have Tyler's abortion" (59). Apparently, Marla creates her

own self-destruction by virtue of her own apathy—and as the bootstrap ideology maintains, she has no one to blame for her poverty but herself. Nothing she says creates the protagonist's aversion to her; rather, it is because her "lie reflects [his] lie" that creates such a strong reaction.

While leeching off the suffering of others enabled the protagonist to sleep and "function" in the normal world, his psyche will not allow him to kill off the irksome form of Marla, who forces confrontation by her very presence—he *must* react to her. He blames her for ruining his emotional "vacation," but in reality, the protagonist can no longer cry at the support group meetings because pallid, cigarette-smoking, emotionless Marla "reflects" his true feelings (13). Appropriately, she is utterly nonplussed by the weeping of her partner in the group hug session, or in any of the support sessions because they're all representative of the "fake," inauthentic emotions expressed by the protagonist; her very presence removes his buffer: the "out-of-body" (9) aspect of his insomnia, the "insomnia distance of everything [wherein] you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (11). Hence, Marla exposes the truth behind his self-delusion—the reality of death that has created the people he exists as an emotional parasite among and the vanity of his self-serving pity. His response to her is to become what he has marginalized: he becomes Tyler.

At this point, the rhetorical violence Palahniuk uses becomes more intense in keeping with the shift in the protagonist's functioning from passive to active internalized violence. While the appearance of Marla, and subsequently Tyler, is not necessarily indicative of the point of the protagonist's psychotic break (the support group members

may well be part of his delusion as well), it certainly indicates an enormous shift in his functioning: he blows up his apartment, signaling his rejection of consumerist ideology, and essentially becomes an indigent living in a condemned house in the worst part of town indicating his attempt to assimilate with those he has heretofore marginalized. The advent of the Tyler personality essentially allows him to become one of the dregs of society but with a twist: while the support group experience confirmed his existence by allowing him to participate in their victimization in a passive, voyeuristic fashion as a facet of their alterity, the self-victimization he achieves through fight club gives him *self-validation* through agency—he is a victim, true, but a victim by choice:

Instead of Tyler, I felt finally I could get my hands on everything in the world that didn't work, my cleaning that came back with the collar buttons broken, the bank that says I'm hundreds of dollars overdrawn. My job where my boss got on my computer and fiddled with my DOS execute commands. And Marla Singer, who stole the support groups from me. Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered. (44-45)

Hence, the protagonist gains agency, but he does so by self-mutilation: ironically, while he can tell himself he is not a victim of society or infirmity, he has victimized himself by embracing a nihilistic attitude toward everything—Marla included.

If Marla represents the amalgamation of the support group members, or the marginalized members of society, Tyler represents a disingenuous attempt to try to deal with that “problem”—he is really only a new buffer the protagonist creates in his attempt to restore his ability to victimize her again for his own ends. While Marla has “hit

bottom,” like Tyler, she has done so through her affinity with human suffering—her own and that of others. By comparison, Tyler’s mantras sound hollow and self-serving. His pithy aphorisms—”You’re not your family . . . You are not your name. . . . You are not your job. . . .”—sound liberating, but his answer to the question, “what am I then” is “the crap and slave of history” (123). Tyler’s equation of himself and others with feces is ironically egocentric—it is a means of validating the use of force, whether in the form of overt violence or coercion, as a means of dehumanizing everyone. However, when Marla refers to herself and others as “human buttwipe” (109), she is equating herself with the poor, the homeless, the destitute, the AIDS victims she encounters at the free clinic; in other words, the people whom society, through indifference, has relegated to the status of “The crap and the trash of the world. Post-consumer human butt wipe that no one would ever go to the trouble to recycle.” Similarly, Tyler’s entire philosophy of “hitting bottom” is mockingly about everything the protagonist fears: “Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. . . . Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (49). Significantly, the response to Marla that Tyler represents finds its philosophical locus in fight club, which becomes the object of all his litanies. While they appear to be grounded in some sort of esoteric logic about the way the world works when seen through the eyes of a prophet unencumbered by the lure of commercial excess, they are actually expressions of the protagonist’s growing paranoia that are in keeping with the diagnosis of schizophrenia. Increasingly suspicious of the real world, his boss, and the trappings of normalcy, the protagonist reinvents his world via Tyler, and fight club is really nothing more than the ideological framework behind corporate American consumerism laid bare: ultimately, all of Tyler’s



platitudes are empty, nihilistic rationales—what he is really interested in is power, and the new violences he is constantly inventing metaphorically reveal the dehumanization inherent to that. Once again, Palahniuk uses rhetorical violence to satirically strip the rationale of any compassion whatsoever to reveal its nihilistic roots: the reality of the bootstraps philosophy as a method of rectifying the social problems of poverty and marginalization is that it negates all human value—it is a type of spiritual poverty. By metaphor, if the protagonist's day job objectifies human beings by measuring their worth in dollars and cents under the guise of corporate respectability, when he becomes Tyler, all of the dehumanizing values that buttress that ideologically-fabricated respectability are compressed and made explicit: the real philosophy behind both is that there is no such thing as inherent human worth.

Fight club serves metaphorically to represent the bootstraps philosophy in action. While the protagonist's former belief system allowed him to bury himself between Big Bob's breasts and cry, Tyler clarifies that the appropriate response to victimization is to destroy the victim. His philosophy is an inversion of a compassionate response—Tyler advocates self-destruction initially and the wholesale destruction of the social construct of humanity ultimately. The rationale behind the first fight is explained by Tyler as “about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only professionals fight, and wanting to know more about himself. About self-destruction” (43). The protagonist reasons in response, “At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves.” Hence,

Tyler's mantra is the rejection of the concept of the victim, which he accomplishes by leveling the playing field: he makes a virtue out of victimization.

Near the end of the novel, the protagonist explains, "I know why Tyler occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla" (198). However, Tyler's "love" for Marla is clearly self-serving, and the nature of their relationship exposes this. The fact that when they get together, it's all "humping, humping, humping" (50) is indicative of the protagonist's desire to derive pleasure from her without actually connecting with her emotionally the same way he was formerly able to do from the support group members, and his *Reader's Digest* allusions to "Joe's Raging Bile Duct . . . Grinding Teeth . . . Inflamed Flaring Nostrils" (59) express how angry he is at her for spoiling his ability to do so. Thus, Tyler, or rather the protagonist-as-Tyler, represents a deeper level of satirical invective against false compassion: he can continue to "fuck" Marla, to victimize her or rather what she represents, so long as the Tyler-buffer is in place, but this also prevents him from feeling any pity for her; by becoming a self-inaugurated victim, his only response to her is victimization. Furthermore, the violent, animalistic nature of their sexual relationship is an indictment of the dehumanization inherent to the protagonist's self-serving aims; rhetorically, it is presented in what is regarded to be the single most offensive passage of the novel: "After Tyler and Marla had sex about ten times, Tyler says, Marla said she wanted to get pregnant. Marla said she wanted to have Tyler's abortion" (59).

Ultimately, their sexual relationship is a metaphor for the protagonist's internal conflict—while his goal is the reintegration of the divergent factions of his personality,

his struggle is to prevent it from happening—in his deluded state, reintegration creates for the protagonist the terror of, if not the genuine possibility of, complete identity implosion. In fact, Tyler and Marla's sexual intercourse, which serves as a controlling metaphor for integration, has a stricture against integration—the protagonist cannot ever talk to Marla about Tyler because, as Tyler warns, "If you ever mention me to her, you'll never see me again" (72); hence, to do so would mean coming to terms with the fact that these divergent personalities are actually all parts of his own identity. At this point, Tyler serves as a foil to Marla in that his self-destructive tendencies are reckless rather than suicidal, externalized rather than internalized—he is the contrivance, the functional obstacle, that prevents reintegration. Consequently, the danger presented by the sexual affair between them is that Tyler isn't capable of being the buffer the protagonist expects him to be. He comments disparagingly of the couple's first meeting, "They've never met so Tyler thinks it's a bad thing that Marla is about to die. It's nothing of the kind" (60). Of course, the protagonist's flippant response to Marla's suicide attempt is in keeping with her non-person status—like all the dregs of society, he maintains, society would be better off without her. As a result of his actions, "Tyler is responsible for Marla, forever, because Tyler saved Marla's life" (60); which reflects the protagonist's fear that if he allows himself to regard her as a person, he must take responsibility for her well being—in other words, married to her. And "marrying" himself psychologically with compassion for Marla represents in his mind emasculation, or as she remarks about the strays at the Animal Control facility, "even if someone loves you enough to save your life, they still castrate you" (68). Like the members of Remaining Men Together, it is not merely the

loss of his masculinity that he fears, but rather the loss of identity that is so inherently attached to it—to be compassionate is to be weak, unmanly, powerless.

The status of fight club reflects the protagonist's perceptions about his ability to control his environment, and his success at doing so is in direct parallel to his ability to control Tyler who allows him to maintain his emotional detachment toward Marla. Fight club begins with the illusion of a consensual controlled situation—a very private, internalized affair, with rigid rules (“The first rule of fight club is that you don’t talk about fight club. The second rule of fight club . . .” [50]). As such, the protagonist is comfortable that he has his fiction completely in hand (whether or not he is cognizant that it is a fiction) because these rules are ones he believes were arrived at by Tyler and himself (57). However, the first two rules are quickly ignored—within that same paragraph, Tyler is warning “You’re here because someone broke the rules. Somebody told you about fight club.” Since fight club is the invention of the protagonist and Tyler and they invented the rules, the protagonist knows that the “someone” who “broke the rules” must have necessarily been Tyler indicating that he is losing the control he is so desperate to maintain. His answer to the problem of Marla—to regard everyone as a victim of the terminal disease of life—has taken on a life of its own. It is at this point that the protagonist's loyalties flip. Now, he must save Marla from Tyler, whom he created to save her in the first place.

Approximately halfway through the narrative, the protagonist's insomnia returns, triggered by an incident in his office that causes him to distrust Tyler. His boss confronts him after finding copies of the fight club rules on the office copying machine. The

protagonist responds with veiled threats about a killing spree he might elicit should the supervisor continue to kowtow him. The reason he is sure he will get away with this is because of the corporate “skeletons” he is aware of:

What I don't have to say is I know about the leather interiors that cause birth defects. I know about the counterfeit brake linings that looked good enough to pass the purchasing agent, but fail after two thousand miles. I know about the air-conditioning rheostat that gets so hot it sets fire to the maps in your glove compartment. I know how many people burn alive because of fuel-injector flashback. I've seen people's legs cut off at the knee when turbochargers start exploding and send their vanes through the firewall and into the passenger compartment. I've been out in the field and seen the burned-up cars and seen the reports where CAUSE OF FAILURE is recorded as “unknown.” No, I say, the paper's not mine. I take the paper between two fingers and jerk it out of his hand. I crumble the paper into a ball and toss it into the trash can next to my desk. Maybe, I say, you shouldn't be bringing me every little piece of trash you pick up.

(90)

Notably, in this episode that models his original description of his protagonist's work, Palahniuk intensifies his original premise: the protagonist gets away with threatening mass murder because his company practices mass murder. It also indicates a change in the protagonist's assurances that he is in control of his delusion, and as such, it serves rhetorically as a motive for the impending advent of Project Mayhem which is little more than an insane reinvention of the dehumanization externalized violence and inherent to

his day job in a new form; the irony that Palahniuk intends, of course, is that the violence of both are coded with ideological premises that attempt to rationalize what is irrational.

It is significant that in the episode that follows, the protagonist is once again plagued with insomnia, and for the first time, he questions Tyler's honesty—he suspects that Tyler is doing something with regard to fight club without his knowledge. It is further significant that the ambiguously-gendered Big Bob personality reappears at the end of this chapter as a member of fight club immediately after the protagonist's defiance of his boss/father. Bob is no longer flabby; his arms are now “quilted with muscles and so hard they shine” (100). He proceeds to provide the protagonist with the unsettling news about several other fight clubs that Tyler has started without his awareness. He also makes the protagonist privy to the street knowledge that Tyler is the inventor of fight club, while there is no mention of himself. Hence, the remasculined Bob once again represents the protagonist's self-perception—fight club has given him a revitalized masculinity, but there is nonetheless something inauthentic about Bob. He remains a partial man, and his enthusiastic breaking of the fight club rules signifies the false sense of control that the protagonist has over his new-found masculinity-as-violence. Furthermore, Tyler and fight club are one in the same—just as Bob represents his suspicion that the new masculinity he has acquired is inauthentic, Bob's suggestions about Tyler's mendacity corresponds to the protagonist's growing fear that the newfound masculinity that Tyler and fight club have come to embody for him is illusory. Furthermore, his interest in meeting Tyler (he asks the protagonist “Do you know him?” twice in the final paragraph) represents another attempt at reintegration expressed by one of his distinct personalities, and the

protagonist's halting denial ("I dunno, I say. Maybe.") displays his reluctance to allow that to happen.

It is also important to re-emphasize that Big Bob is an aspect of the protagonist's personality. As such, he serves as a fool who mimics the absurdity of the protagonist's logic. His mindlessly enthusiastic devotion to the fight club/Project Mayhem cult mirrors that of the protagonist, who is just as much of a follower as Bob, but he cannot see it because (as in the case with the Marla personality), that aspect of his personality has separated from his primary identity into a distinct personality. He is the embodiment of all the protagonist fears—like all the other space monkeys, he doesn't have a name, his "fingerprints had been burned off with lye," and once he succumbs to Tyler's religion, his existence is consumed with perpetuating random violence that exists to strip away, and thus codify, the philosophy that no one really has an identity. Consequently, each episode in which the protagonist encounters Big Bob results in introspection—Bob's condition caricatures his own and throws it into relief; as a result, the protagonist's encounters with Bob always result in summoning forth the Marla personality—Athena-like, she seems to burst forth from the Bob personality in reaction to it. Bob, then, as court jester, magnifies the protagonist's own ridiculous state, which leads to a separation of the feminine personality from the Bob-gender-amalgam so that he might process what he has seen.

A third critical shift in the action occurs due to an event that causes the protagonist to revalue Marla as a person. At this point Palahniuk reverts to the passive violence of disease to rhetorically bolster the interaction between the two characters. The episode begins with Marla asking the protagonist (who she thinks is Tyler) to "skip the

gym and the library or the laundry or whatever [he] had planned after work and come see her, instead” (102) so that he might do her “a favor” by checking her breasts for cancerous lumps. With uncharacteristic compassion toward her, he responds to her summons and performs the examination as requested. The rhetorical significance of this interaction with Marla is that Palahniuk uses the violence of disease to flip the enargeiac value of Marla’s character: when it is revealed that she thinks she has breast cancer, she ceases to be marginalized in the protagonist’s mind. His perception changes, and it is because while he is in Marla’s room giving her a breast exam, they connect in a very genuine way—in the fashion that Marla’s presence has always demanded of him. By contrast, the earlier episodes in which Tyler and Marla were having sex were violent and dehumanizing acts set in the context of physical intimacy. In this episode, the protagonist and engages the Marla personality in an intimate way that has erotic overtones—she is naked and he must handle her breasts to conduct the examination. Metaphorically, this posture mimics erotic physical contact that informs the genuine emotional honesty the protagonist has feared and avoided to this point. The absence of Tyler *is* the loss of the protagonist’s ability to keep the Marla personality at a distance—without Tyler, he cannot forestall reintegration. Furthermore, this episode is violent as well, made so by the threat of a terminal disease, but this also serves, by contrast, to humanize the interaction—to humanize Marla for the protagonist.

While conducting the examination, he tells Marla about an experience he had as a college student when he went to the medical school to have a wart frozen off of his penis. It is a way for him to reach out to her via the common experience of being without



medical insurance and to put her at ease due to the comic nature of the account. His fingers hesitate in his examination, which causes Marla to catch her breath and panic in fear that he has found a lump. But the reason he actually stops is due to a vivid memory that his story has reawakened. While having the wart treated, the student noticed a birthmark on the protagonist's foot and immediately summoned three "real" doctors, who subsequently gave such attention to the birthmark that "it was as if the rest of the person, half dressed with God's gift half frozen, didn't exist" (104). When they learned what it actually was, the doctors abruptly left. When the baffled protagonist questioned the student about the strange incident,

the student said everyone thought the birthmark was cancer. There was this new kind of cancer that was getting young men. They wake up with a red spot on their feet or ankles. The spots don't go away, they spread until they cover you and then you die. The student said, the doctors and everyone were so excited because they thought you had this new cancer. Very few people had it, yet, but it was spreading. (105)

He goes on to tell her that he still has the Polaroid photograph the doctors took of his foot when they mistakenly believed he had Kaposi's Sarcoma—AIDS—which he uses as a sort of *memento-mori* to remind himself "how I once had cancer for ten minutes, worse than cancer." He then tries to lighten Marla's spirits with a humorous anecdote about his grandmother who survived a partial mastectomy. He wants to comfort Marla, to reassure her that "if she found anything this morning [in her breast], it was a mistake. A birthmark" (106). Yet, he will not tell her about his last embrace with Chloe, emaciated

with disease, or that he hides his birthmark at the beach because he is afraid “that people will see” his foot and that he will “start to die in their minds,” which signifies that he has now accomplished the ability to “be with Marla” that he could not achieve as a voyeur of the support groups or as Tyler—he is able to experience genuine compassion. Once again, the protagonist’s fear of loss-of-identity emerges, but the result is not his typical one of wanting to push Marla away. Instead, his identification with her allows him to invert the fear into a shared-identity with her. The memory he shares, which obviously serves as the catalyst behind the protagonist’s morbid fear of death by disease, allows him to connect with her through their common fear. He tells her, “Cancer will be like that.... There will be mistakes, and maybe the point is not to forget the rest of yourself if one little part might go bad.” In this one phrase, Palahniuk succinctly defines the protagonist’s internal struggle—“cancer,” or violence, is a way society marginalizes some people, but the key is to not yield to that marginalization—to not marginalize yourself and others.

While he continues to be secretive with her, it is not because he is afraid that embracing her will result in a loss of his masculinity, but rather because “there are a lot of things we don’t want to know about the people we love,” specifically, that they we are going to lose them, which is the ultimate threat inherent in emotional intimacy. The chapter concludes with him telling her about a Dear Abby letter:

To warm her up, to make her laugh, I tell Marla about the woman in Dear Abby who married a handsome successful mortician and on their wedding night, he made her soak in a tub of ice water until her skin was freezing to the touch, and then he made her lie in bed completely still while he had intercourse with her cold

inert body. The funny thing is this woman had done this as a newlywed, and gone on to do it for the next ten years of marriage and now she was writing to Dear Abby to ask if Abby thought it meant something.

While the story is humorous, it represents the turning point for the protagonist: it is a metaphor for his relationship with Marla to this point: to “warm her up,” to humanize her in his own mind, he tells her a story about a woman who had to pretend she was dead in order to have an intimate relationship. Before, Marla was a “faker” like himself. Now, she is legitimate—a person: “Marla had started going to the support groups after she found the first lump” (107). Marla fears cancer—that her body is at war against her, and the protagonist reflects on his momentary brush with AIDS; the random violence of disease allows him to find the connection with her—something he never allowed himself to do in the support groups. He feels empathy toward her, and for him to recover empathy is the first step in reintegrating with Marla. Like the wife of the mortician, he has come to question his own frozen response to emotions in response to his fear of death.

This episode sets up a necessary shift in loyalty that begins to take place in the protagonist-Tyler-Marla triangle in that the protagonist’s intimate episode with Marla evokes a crisis brought about by his identification with her. The tension between victimizing Marla and empathizing with her is the key issue. Because of their shared threat of cancer, he cannot respond to her with pity, as Aristotle contends, because her experience is too close to his own. In Marla, the vulnerability of the support group victims is manifested, except now, that has been reevaluated and the buffer that allowed him to marginalize her, to separate her as a distinct personality, has been erased—he now

sees that her tragedy is a mirror image of his own. Furthermore, the fractured trust between himself and Tyler is compounded by the intimate encounter he experienced with Marla. They now have a secret, in his perception, and that secret knowledge places him in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between Tyler and his mirror opposite, Marla. His reaction to it is to escalate the violence of fight club to the level of terrorism with the creation of Project Mayhem, via Tyler. When Marla is “humanized,” the protagonist reacts by wanting to kill everything beautiful in the world—to destroy everything that is humanitarian. After his encounter with Marla, the protagonist chooses to fight “a young guy with an angel’s face” because he “was in a mood to destroy something beautiful” (122). After nearly killing the young man, he explains his rage to Tyler as follows:

I said I felt like crap and not relaxed at all. I didn’t get any kind of buzz. Maybe I’d developed a jones. You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move on to something bigger . . . . Pounding that kid, I really wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every endangered panda that wouldn’t screw to save its species and every whale or dolphin that gave up and ran itself aground. Don’t think of this as extinction. Think of this as downsizing. For thousands of years, human beings had screwed up and trashed and crapped on this planet, and now history expected me to clean up after everyone. I held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of my arm and bashed him with my knuckles, bashed him until his teeth broke through his lips. Bashed him with my elbow after that until he fell through my arms into a heap at my feet. Until the skin

was pounded thin across his cheekbones and turned black. I wanted to breathe smoke. Birds and deer are a silly luxury, and all the fish should be floating. I wanted to burn the Louvre. I'd do the Elgin Marbles with a sledgehammer and wipe my ass with the *Mona Lisa*. This is my world, now. This is my world, my world, and those ancient people are dead. It was at breakfast that morning that Tyler invented Project Mayhem. We wanted to blast the world free of history. (123-124)

The protagonist's violence escalates to compensate for his near capitulation to his feminine side in the form of Marla. His reaction to humanizing Marla is the metaphoric culmination of all the rhetorical violence in the novel because compassion and dehumanization necessarily cannot coexist. Thematically, the escalation of violence in the protagonist is a product of his schizophrenia, and his hyperbolic rage is indicative of his total loss of the control his paranoia drives him to maintain. As such, the violence in the passage describes the intractability of the social problem of violence that Tyler represents, or as the protagonist observes, "You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move on to something bigger" (123). Consequently, this event also triggers the advent of Project Mayhem as a means of reinstating the control that fight club formerly represented for the protagonist; however, it is actually the product of the escalating nature of violence and, as such, is never under his control, even though he created it. Project Mayhem's stated purpose is to inaugurate an "ice age. A prematurely induced dark age" that "will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover" (125). It is difficult to dismiss in this mission statement the

deliberate cancer lingo and the obvious associations it must carry for the Marla personality whom the protagonist now views as a kind of carcinogenic threat to his identity.

The protagonist's psychosis becomes the controlling metaphor for the remainder of the novel inasmuch as it represents the madness of a cultural ideology that marginalizes its weakest members—and this is made explicit by the fact that Project Mayhem is little more than a thinly disguised reemergence of the corporate world he originally rejected stripped of the artifice of social endorsement. As such, the quality of the violence at this point functions like a juggernaut—externalized and active, it explosively manifests itself in the protagonist's actual attempts at self-destruction through suicide and actual rendering of non-personhood through the murder of “real” characters. At this point, his delusion has become totally intractable. Twice faced with what Tyler refers to as “near-life experiences,” the harried protagonist's actions are rhetorically bound to the account of Chloe's death as described on page 36—the “evacuation of the soul” from the body, and what the mechanic refers to, ironically, as the “the amazing miracle of death . . . . One minute you're a person, the next minute, you're an object” (139, 153). He is no longer a victim-by-choice, but rather a victim of the system he has built and marginalized by his attempt to escape from it.

The Tyler personality has completely separated from the Marla personality, which represents the protagonist's total loss of the capacity to feel empathy, so naturally the world he creates is one in which everyone is objectified. Ironically, the world he creates through Tyler makes it impossible for Marla to exist, because she is the epitome of lost

humanity—the icon of the hapless victim Tyler must necessarily destroy. It is after his period of testing out the possibility of the Project Mayhem world that the protagonist seeks out Tyler to confirm his mounting suspicions that Tyler is his alternate personality, and Tyler confirms this in Chapter 22; yet, the realization does not give the protagonist the required agency to reintegrate because Tyler has taken on a life of his own—he intends to become the dominant personality by sheer force of will. The tables have now turned for the protagonist—the “way to be with Marla” (198) by victimizing her that he created Tyler to facilitate has now resulted in his own victimization *by* Tyler, who threatens the protagonist, “if you fuck with me, if you chain yourself to the bed at night or take big doses of sleeping pills, then we’ll be enemies. And I’ll get you for it” (168). The protagonist then turns to Marla for help, but Tyler remains true to his threat—by the end of the novel, the protagonist-as-Tyler has killed his boss and a public official, guaranteeing that he will not be able to reintegrate into the reality that Marla represents.

Immediately following the protagonist’s recognition of Tyler as an alternate personality, Big Bob is killed during a Project Mayhem assignment. The space monkeys all recite his name, “Robert Paulson” in tribute because, as the protagonist explains, “only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes” (178). Yet the physical death described by the protagonist is reflective of the task of reintegration or complete loss of self that the recognition of Tyler as an alternate personality forces upon him. He can no longer exist as an ambivalent being; he can no longer live in both worlds, switching between the two at the whim of his psyche. Because Bob is the personification of that ambivalence, he must

necessarily die because his elimination is the first step in destroying Tyler; his eulogy forecasts the result of reintegration—when the alternate personalities “die,” the protagonist’s “name” (identity) will be restored, and this must happen when they cease to fulfill their psychotic function—they are “no longer part of the effort” (178). It also indicates that the protagonist’s ambivalence at this point—while he is ridiculing the mindless devotion of the space monkeys (the fact that Bob’s brains have been blown out violently represents this), the eulogy, which after all is the product of his delusion as well, indicates his realization that their “deaths” are a good thing: “In death we become heroes” (178). Hence at this point, all of his personalities are pushing him toward reintegration *except* Tyler—Palahniuk flips the energeic value of the violence once again in that now, the violence perpetuated by Project Mayhem represents a desperate form of healing—death therapy: Project Mayhem exists as a means for the protagonist to kill off the space monkeys, or the disparate personalities he has created to populate fight club. After the death of Big Bob, the action of the novel goes into hyperdrive. Struggling to become the dominant personality, Tyler forces the protagonist to greater acts of subversion, homicide, and ultimately the impending threat of terrorism/mass murder. The death of Tyler is the culmination Project Mayhem, which has become an ultimate way for the protagonist to reintegrate his personalities as well as a psychotic, desperate attempt to reintegrate with the world destructively. That drive to re-engage with reality is brought about by his rejection of the delusional world he has created: to live in an imaginary world is to not actually “exist” because “an isolated self can truly be said to be only an abstraction” (Gusdorf qtd. In Kinneavy 408). Ultimately, the protagonist’s solution to “save” Marla is



to become both “homicidal”/ suicidal toward himself: he can’t “kill” Tyler without shooting himself, and that is the choice he makes, although in reality he only shoots himself through the cheek.

The novel ends with the protagonist in “heaven,” his name for the psychiatric facility where he is confined by the authorities. It is only in this compromised state that he can exist in the real world, through the assistance of the “Valley of the Dolls playset” (207). The confinement the institution affords him is the control he is unable to generate of his own accord. Yet, the psychotropic medications he must now take do not serve their purpose, and his recovery is incomplete—he cannot kill Tyler, ultimately and the space monkeys masquerading as hospital orderlies confirm that the dehumanization he represents is still alive and active: “We miss you, Mr. Durden. Everything’s going according to the plan” (208). It is for this reason that he admits he’s not ready to return to reality, despite Marla’s encouragement that someday he will. He has become like the support group members in that he is now the victim of the passive violence of a diseased mind and dependent upon the intervention of others for his every need.

### **Interpreting the Argument**

Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* is clearly a candidate for misinterpretation because of the tension between his rhetorical use of violence-as-metaphor and the vagueness of the argument he is attempting to present. The real focus of *Fight Club* is the concept of poverty-as-violence and the perception that this functions as a means of “othering” the lowest classes—the poverty of violence make people “invisible” in the sense that their

needs are neither validated nor addressed in any cogent fashion by the social system at large. Consequently, the violence in the book is used to create “others” out of the protagonist and the characters that populate the story. Their hideous bruises and wounds are the equivalent of the protagonist’s birthmark, which represents his genuine fear “that people will see my foot and I’ll start to die in their minds” (106)—it is not simply the fear of disease, but rather the fear of becoming a non-being. Furthermore, Marla’s description of the AIDS victims she encountered at the free clinic sound remarkably like the victims of fight club—“sunken and dark around their eyes”; their teeth “just shards of bone” (108). The genuine tragedy of the diseased person is not simply the lack of agency, but rather that they “die” in our minds. The protagonist becomes an indigent himself; he takes up residence in a condemned house, his appearance is repulsive, and he becomes disconnected from society. Yet, something that is missing from the novel, with the exception of the brief respite hinted at with regard to Marla, is any way for the reader to feel compassion for any of the characters. While Marla is humanized to some degree, she stands in contrast to Tyler, who is utterly degenerate, and the protagonist as well. Hence, the satire in the novel is not leveled at the individual’s response to the problem of poverty, but something greater.

While it is a popular notion to assume that violence is a product of poverty among the lowest classes, it is a simplistic way to describe a phenomenon created by multiple sociological factors that make up a complex social system. A 2005 study conducted by the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Institute for Juvenile Research entitled “The Developmental-Ecology of Influences on Urban Youth Violence: Community,

Neighborhoods, Parenting, and Deviant Peers” concluded that “integrating across levels and factors affecting development indicates effects are often independent, sometimes are not direct, and frequently have complex relations to outcomes” (21); in other words, it is impossible to isolate the factors that contribute to the prevalence of violence among the lower classes. Conversely, Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar contends:

Poverty can be an exacerbating factor in poor areas, but is rarely the originating factor. The roots of violence lie in feelings of injustice for a variety of historical, social and economic reasons. The poor are typically victims of gross injustice. Yet the injustice that sparks violence seems related most of all to issues of identity — religion, caste, region, tribe. (Aiyar)

This perspective on violence is useful in deciphering Palahniuk’s satire—it can be understood as a riff on the ideological systems that code us with our identities. As such, *Fight Club* can be interpreted on a variety of levels: for example, it can easily be read as a send-up of the liberal-versus-conservative approaches to social issues inherent to the American political system wherein the protagonist-as-voyeur lampoons the way issues of poverty are used as fodder for political gain rather than any interest in genuine human compassion cast against the protagonist-as-victimizer, which mocks the conservative approach to poverty by castigating victims for not pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps.

The presenting argument of *Fight Club* is informed by a number of different popular philosophies and ideologies, and the satire further serves as an indictment against them. The nihilistic existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche who both

attempted to replace traditional morality with an ethics based on authenticity serves as the philosophy that informs the Tyler character. For both philosophers, social constructs lead to “slave morality,” in Nietzsche’s terms, or “bad faith,” in Sartre’s. While their basic ontological foundations are different, both philosophers advocate breaking free of traditional morality in favor of individual actualization. For Nietzsche, this takes the form of the *übermensch*, or “superman”—a theoretical secular savior who overcomes slave morality and changes society as a whole. For Sartre, anyone can overcome self-deception and lead an authentic life. The obvious influence of these two thinkers on Foucault, and consequently Palahniuk and *Fight Club*, is apparent in the rejection of traditional morality and the insistence upon discovering ones “true self.” Ultimately, however, self-actualization is a red herring in the novel. While it is true that the protagonist follows the rules of existentialism—the rejection of social morality in the attempt to acquire his “true self”—he does not succeed. At the end of the novel, he is incarcerated in a mental institution. Unlike the film version, it does not resolve with his “getting the girl.”

Likewise, consumerism is another aspect of social morality that Palahniuk seems to be lampooning, but too sharp a focus on this bit of satire can be misleading as well. The protagonist’s rejection of the value that equates success with status projected in possessions is vividly displayed when he blows up his apartment full of IKEA furniture and sends one of his trendy lamps rocketing through the windshield of his trendy car. His moving into a condemned house in the low rent district is also indicative of this rejection. Perhaps the most caustic critique, however, comes in the form of Tyler’s soap, which is made from human fat, and which he sells at high-end retail stores. The irony that people

buy soap made from human fat, which symbolizes the product of their excess, is compounded by the fact that the proceeds from the soap is used to fund the activities of Project Mayhem, which has their destruction as its goal. Ultimately, however, Palahniuk is not condemning consumerism in and of itself—he is simply using it metaphorically to elucidate the irony of elevating the acquisition of “things” over the value of human life. The protagonist, after all, is an unreliable narrator due to the fact that he is a paranoid schizophrenic: his observations and conclusions are necessarily questionable because they are informed by his insanity.

Palahniuk’s novel follows a familiar pattern in literature described by Barbara Tipa Lupack in *Insanity as Redemption: Inmates Running the Asylum*. Lupack observes that “mad” protagonists are typically “out of step with the absurd world around them” (1). They “withdraw from society as they struggle to internalize issues of family, culture, and history and ultimately return (somewhat circuitously) to effect some kind of social amelioration, a process that is a variation of the monomythic pattern of departure-initiation-return described by Joseph Campbell.” The nature of such protagonists often lends itself to violent discourse as a means of portraying the psychotic nature of its thought processes. In *Fight Club*, the ultimate thought process for the protagonist involves an attempt to discover his “true” self by violently struggling against the standard social definitions for personhood, success, gender and power as represented by his multiple personalities. The “departure-initiation-return” is his effort to winnow out the truth of his identity from the mixed messages presented by consumerism and essentialism. The way he confronts those questions is through the dialogue that occurs

between himself and the rigidly gender-defined aspects of his personality, personified by his delusion-based counterparts. As each of these individual characters develop, however, the meaning behind their discourse changes. Consequently, his journey does not culminate in reintegration because the novel is a satire—he represents the paranoid schizophrenia of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century American consumerist ideology that marginalizes those who do not fit within the confines of its definitions of success. There is no solution but to confine and suppress this madness before it destroys us all.

Ultimately, the trouble with *Fight Club* is that it doesn't offer any solution to the problem it presents, which leads one to question the author's motives. When asked in an interview if the emergence of "real" fight clubs were the product of the novel, Palahniuk replied, "Really, I don't know," but added, "I'd rather see someone doing it this way, you know, expressing and inventing in this kind of a structured, safe, consensual place, rather than walking into Starbucks with a gun and killing everybody and himself" (Sirius). His answer is hyperbolic—it assumes that sociopaths just need a creative outlet; furthermore, it is odd that he sees this behavior as a way of "expressing and inventing" and assumes that the violence these groups conduct occurs in a "structured, safe, consensual" environment—that is certainly not the case in his novel. Yet, Palahniuk's public persona is that of an eccentric—whether this is genuine or merely posturing, it is difficult to ascertain. How could a man who volunteers "at a homeless shelter serving breakfast" and an "AIDS hospice center" write novels that seem to glorify dehumanization? He comments in the same interview regarding the positive response to *Fight Club*,

People need to be broken and rebuilt, and to have scars to prove it. It's a time when we're acknowledging this need, and finding ways to fulfill it other than just buying stuff. Because everybody's sort of getting to the point where they've got the job they want, they can buy the stuff they want and have always been told they need. They're really finding out that's not the answer. (Sirius)

So what is the answer Palahniuk is proposing? It sounds like Tyler's solution—self-destruction—but to what end? His rhetoric has an almost religious quality: the way to find oneself is to destroy oneself. This, of course, begs the question, if self-destruction is the answer, then why bother with humanitarian efforts at all? Consequently, *Fight Club* seems latent with meaning; it seems as if there is some answer hidden amongst the metaphors, but ultimately, the answer seems to be that there is no answer. This ambiguity serves to emphasize the rhetorical power of violence—without guidance, it can function like a runaway automobile, speeding down the road with no one at the wheel. It is so powerful that only a master can harness its inherent destructive potential—something Toni Morrison clearly displayed, yet something Palahniuk's novel clearly lacks. A close reading may leave room for interpreting the work in humanistic, affirming terms; however, it is all too easy to miss the meaning and read it as purely nihilistic and gratuitously violent.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

While the course of this study has focused on rhetorical violence as it occurs in works of fiction, the principles may also provide a way to understand physical violence in the real world. As such, it begs the question—does the violence that is so prevalent in American creative arts perpetuate violence? I first became interested in this topic shortly after the shootings at Columbine High School and the rash of school shootings that followed. Since that time, the tragedy of 9/11 has arrested the national attention and resulted in war. Yet, in all these tragedies, an irony stood out—the irony of the fact that Americans riveted to their televisions to watch the violence unfold between commercial interruptions. Columnist Walter Brasch catalogued a phenomenon that was all too familiar in the days after 9/11:

Most corporate America had pulled all advertising from the TV networks and national news magazines for up to a week following the tragedy while they re-evaluated their campaigns. When they returned, they had draped themselves into red, white, and blue bunting, and told us it's patriotic to spend money in a lagging economy. On thousands of fiberglass and plastic highway signs, words of hope trumpet words of advertising. Below "God Bless America," we see "Chili Fries, \$1.49." Below "United We Stand," we're told "special prices on carpets." A flyer I received at home combined the flag, a patriotic call, a message of sympathy—



and my inviolate right to buy sofas on sale. General Motors, trying to sell cars, declared “in this time of terrible adversity, let’s stand together. And let’s keep America rolling.”

Perhaps the most flagrant commercial callousness at the time had to do with the sales of American flags—a commodity that no store seemed to be able to keep in stock. But red, white and blue bumper stickers bearing some patriotic slogan (along with some corporate logo) were ubiquitous within weeks of the tragedy.

Rhetorical violence demands our rapt attention—and the voice of mortal tragedy draws a crowd. Gustave Cohen asserts that the rhetorical efficacy of violence grows out of “a universally cruel tendency” (qtd. in Ender 232)—perhaps something akin to Freud’s identification of sadism as the “representative” of the death instinct (*Ego* 645), the “roots” of which, he notes,

are easy to detect in the normal. The sexuality of most male beings contains an element of aggressiveness—a desire to subjugate; the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing. . . . The history of human civilization shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct. (*Three Essays* 252).

But Cohen’s cruelty and Freud’s dualism of death instinct versus sexual instinct suggests the animalism that Morrison argued against so convincingly in *Beloved*. If violence in art appeals to an innate cruelty, an instinct to dehumanize, then it appeals to something that is uniquely human—something worse than animal. Such explanations of violence point to

the endless human need to categorize, explain, and rationalize violence as an anomaly. Granted, the language is more inflated, more technical, yet the drive to render the illogic of violence rhetorical to make it somehow more palatable is no different than those who rely on religion, or nationalism, or social mores to do so. As Foucault notes, “discourse is not a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (*langue*), the intrication of a lexicon and an experience,” but rather a complex system of “rules [that] define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects” (*Archaeology* 48-49). Ultimately, therefore, discourse is not so much a semiotic exercise—a binary system of *signifiers* and *signifieds* (per Saussure)—as it is composed of

practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to language (*langue*) and to speech. (49)

This “forming” and “ordering” of objects is the exclusively human act of transforming bodily experiences and perceptions into meaningful data in support of our natural drive to sustain cognitive equilibrium—a sense of familiarity and safety about ourselves, our societies and the world. I agree with Richard Rorty’s assertion: “We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there” (4-5). Language is humankind’s god-like gift—we *speak* the world into existence: we “create” our world, so to speak. But if we can speak things into being, can we not also speak things into destruction?

Burke's second clause in his "Definition of Man" is that he is the "Inventor of the negative" (*Language* 9)—without language, there are no "thou-shalt-nots of morality" (11). Furthermore, there is no "mine" versus "not-mine." There is no "self" and there is no "other." There are no conflicting ideologies with which to contend. Language is the unique human tool capable of creating ontology by affirming the existence of the individual. Because it also necessarily creates the possibility of the negative, it must therefore be capable of negating ontological existence: therefore, as Heidegger observes, language is dangerous because it creates the possibility of the existence of danger as a phenomenon: "Man is he who he is, precisely in the affirmation of his own existence. . . . It is language which first creates the manifest conditions for menace and confusion to existence, that is to say—danger" ("Hölderlin" 759-60).

A central focus of this study has been Booth's observation that "in fictional forms most of the important facts are simultaneously values, and to ignore the values is to turn the object studied into something less than itself" (*Rhetoric* 419). The American values of transformation and self-definition have been bolstered and promulgated through our national literature—values that in many ways have come to inform our national ideology. And yet it is that ideology that has become the focus of violence in the real world. Alon Ben-Meir in an article entitled, "Why They Hate America," notes that, in the four years since 9/11, anti-American sentiments are steadily rising: in recent polls taken in many Arab and Muslim countries, "85 to 90 percent of the people have extremely negative views of America." Ben-Meir identifies the primary reason for this is an ideological conflict:

More than anything else, Muslim religious radicals fear the pervasiveness of American culture and what they perceive as its disastrous influence on Arab and Muslim youth. Shiek Yousef el-Hassan, a Hamas leader in the West Bank, sees American culture, however it manifests itself—in music, clothing, literature, the arts, and the like—as implicitly and explicitly overshadowing, corrupting, and devaluing indigenous cultures and their way of life. This concern over the American cultural invasion has been brought into sharp focus primarily because of the Internet and the technological revolution. Arab states like Saudi Arabia and many Muslim countries like Iran are trying only with limited success to combat what they view as American apostasy and abandonment of basic moral tenants and so shield their “innocents” from corruption. The awareness that this cultural battle may be lost because of the younger generation's attraction to Western “modernity” adds to the frustration and thus the vehemence of anti-American sentiments.

Hence, what our enemies find most offensive about us is our “music, clothing, literature, the arts,” or more pointedly, the values we express through those things. Perhaps the question we should be asking, then, is not “does the violence that is so prevalent in American creative arts perpetuate violence?” but rather, “do the values we express through our creative arts perpetuate violence?”

## The Rhetoric of 9/11

In recent times, Americans have felt the direct impact of violence used for explicit interpretation. America's response to the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 has been to engage another form of social institution based in ritual used to limit the scope of violence—conventional warfare—and has been largely frustrated in the attempt. The articles of the Geneva Convention attest to the global ritualization of conventional warfare, but terrorism functions by deliberately ignoring the ritual and moving contrary to the arbitrary “rules of fair play.” Terrorism is to conventional warfare what vigilanteism is to the judicial system, what blood feud is to the sacrificial system. While war and terrorism can both be viewed rhetorically (what Burke refers to as the “ultimate disease of cooperation”) in that both are used to communicate political goals, conventional warfare does so from a macro perspective that is informed by lofty ideals and broad abstractions of social values: one society's values dominate those of another because, as Burke observes, “The *principles* of war are not themselves warlike, and are ultimately reducible to universal principles of physics and dialectic” (*Rhetoric* 11). Terrorism, transversely, is not warfare at all, but a tightly compressed form of political rhetoric that makes deliberate use of highly representational acts of violence narrowly focused to render the greatest dramatic impact to a specific message. The ritual of terrorism is the violent act itself reflected in the bodies of the victims, which is evident in the fact that all terrorist acts are followed almost immediately by a formal rationale issued by the terrorist organization responsible for the attack. Consider, for example, al-Qaeda spokesman Sulaiman Abu Ghaith's statement following the 9/11 attacks:

The actions by these young men who destroyed the United States and launched the storm of planes against it have done a good deed. They transferred the battle into the US heartland. Let the United States know that with God's permission, the battle will continue to be waged on its territory until it leaves our lands, stops its support for the Jews, and lifts the unjust embargo on the Iraqi people who have lost more than one million children. The Americans should know that the storm of plane attacks will not abate, with God's permission. There are thousands of the Islamic nation's youths who are eager to die just as the Americans are eager to live. ("In Full")

While Sulaiman Abu Ghaith's statement provided the justifications for the attack, it was bin Laden himself who actually interpreted them in an *Al Jazirah* interview broadcast on December 27, 2001:

[The 19 terrorists] shook America's throne and struck at the US economy in the heart. They struck the largest military power deep in the heart, thanks to God the Almighty. This is a clear proof that this international usurious damnable economy—which America uses along with its military power to impose infidelity and humiliation on weak people—can easily collapse. Thanks to Almighty God, those blessed attacks, as they themselves admitted, have inflicted on the New York and other markets more than a trillion dollars in losses. ("Bin Laden")

Al-Qaeda, in reality nothing more than a gadfly in comparison to America's military prowess, focused their attack on symbolic targets with metaphoric intent in support of their rhetorical aim: the icon of international commerce (the World Trade Center, or the

“heart” of the US Economy), the icon of democracy (the White House, or “America’s throne”), and the icon of military supremacy (the Pentagon, or the “heart” of the largest military). Seen in strictly rhetorical terms, America’s “rebuttal” to the Islamic extremists has been bombastic, but in comparison, imprecise and unclear, and the recent beheadings of American and British hostages in Iraq filmed and posted on the Internet have only served to magnify how ineffectual conventional warfare is in providing an effective retort to the rhetoric of terrorism.

But what would an appropriate rebuttal sound like? If, as I have claimed, the principles of rhetorical violence may also provide a way to understand real violence in the real world, what can be learned from 9/11? If Burke is right, then can terrorism likewise be understood as “merely a concern with *terms for transformation in general*” (*Rhetoric* 11, Burke’s italics)? The type of attacks executed by al-Qaeda could not have been carried out in a world without the Internet and cell phones. Furthermore, terrorism depends upon mass media to carry its message; one need only consider that the purpose of the first plane that flew into the World Trade Center was to alert the media so they could be there when the second plane struck. So perhaps an appropriate rebuttal would be to suspend freedom of the press in the interest of national security and shut down the media in the case of a terrorist attack. Furthermore, the Internet must be shut down as well. Obviously, these are ludicrous suggestions, but they are “answers” for the question of how to address terrorism—and they are no more ludicrous than the “Global War on Terrorism” because answers such as these seek to confront transformation retroactively using the status quo.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 can be considered a wakeup call for the new millennium. Not long ago, the “Pacific Rim” and “globalization” were catch phrases in business and government rhetoric. We seemed perched on the nexus of a new world order. 9/11, however, demonstrated profoundly that the new technologies we believed were the harbingers of a golden age of global cooperation and affluence could actually lead to our destruction and the dissolution of structures of diplomacy that have been in existence for half a century. Prior to that time, we regarded the transformation as a good thing because we Americans mistakenly believed we controlled it. Since 9/11, we have had to confront the reality of a different kind of transformation—one in which national security and military prowess can no longer be considered synonymous concepts, or that we can take or leave diplomacy, or that everyone in the world prizes democracy. Perhaps 9/11 shows us something about that innate cruelty unique to humans, and the instinct to dehumanize—as in the literary examples, this act of terrorism was driven, inspired and informed by a conflict in values. Perhaps, ultimately, the way to end terrorism is to no longer choose to ignore third world countries, the disenfranchised, and the dissenters to our way of life and exclude them from the dialog of our own society and the society of nations. Perhaps the appropriate rebuttal to terrorism is democracy after all.

### **Final Thoughts**

If it is accurate to say that language is the central defining characteristic of human existence, then it is also necessary to admit that rhetorical violence is an integral part of that system, otherwise it would not be so pervasive in our art and culture. Perhaps to



appreciate life, we must ponder death. All of the works discussed herein have something to say about what it means to be human—not merely in the stories they relate, but in their appeal. Rhetorical violence will continue to be used in our art so long as there is an audience in which it is capable of evoking a cathartic response—so long as it is able to shock, to excite. The rhetoric of violence can certainly be misused; nonetheless, it is crucial to the exploration of the endless human fascination with good and evil, the terrible and the beautiful. It *should* continue to be used so long as it civilizes us and promotes our understanding of the paradoxes inherent to civilization and to being human. From the insularity of safe distance where it is still unthinkable that there are those in the world with enough hatred to organize and execute an attack such as 9/11—this safe distance of removes where it is still incomprehensible because it was on TV—perhaps this is why we need the rhetoric of violence after all. Because life and language and human interaction is dynamic and change is inevitable. And so we have come full circle—we have returned to Aristotle’s cautionary statement regarding *energeia* from the *Metaphysics*:

in the case of evils the end or actuality must be worse than the potentiality; for that which is capable is capable alike of both contraries. Clearly, then, evil does not exist apart from things; for evil is by nature posterior to potentiality. Nor is there in things which are original and eternal any evil or error, or anything which has been destroyed—for destruction is an evil. (9.9.3)

Rhetorical violence has an enormous latent potential for good because it is such a primary form of appeal, but it has an even greater potential for evil. At best, rhetorical violence is a way to mediate real violence. At worst, it is the catalyst behind real violence. In either

case it is a necessary evil—necessary on the one hand, evil on the other—it is its own contradiction.

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